

三上延

ビブリア古書堂の事件手帖 ③

～ 栞子さんと消えない絆～

ビブリア古書堂の事件手帖

ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSHOP BIBLIA'S CASE FILES

MISS SHIORIKO AND THE LASTING BONDS

Written by En Mikami

Illustrated by Hagu Koshijima

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Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia's Case Files

~Miss Shioriko and the Lasting Bonds~

✎ Mikami En ✎





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Illustrations by Koshijima Hagu. Design by Okigubo Yuji	



Translated by **NanoDesu Translations**
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PROLOGUE

THE KING HAS DONKEY EARS – PART I – POPLAR PUBLISHING

2010/11/23 Recent Events Shinokawa Ayaka

I was pretty busy yesterday, so I'm going to write yesterday's entry along with today's.

Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia was closed for a holiday yesterday.

Shioriko left in a car with Goura (employee) this morning. I think they spent the day wandering around the bookstores that she always wanted to visit, but couldn't because of her injury.

She looked really cheerful this morning, so at breakfast I asked her if she was going on a date. But she said "don't make fun of Daisuke like that, it's rude." and scolded me with a scary face.

As far as Shioriko was concerned, Goura had kindly offered to go around visiting bookstores with her during one of their conversations.

She really hates talking about things like love and marriage.

That's why I can't tell her. I can only write about it here.

I'm sure Goura thought of it as a date. He really likes Shioriko.

Speaking of which, I remember being pretty worried when he started working at the store. It was hard to believe that Shioriko, who's terrible with people, had hired him herself. He's really huge and kinda has a scary expression, so I thought he might have tricked her somehow.

But after working with him in the store for a while, I saw that he was actually a timid, hardworking, ordinary guy. He listens to what other people have to say and is even better at customer service than

me.

I can't say it to his face though, so I can only write it here. It seems to me that Goura's the type of person who's easily swayed by people, especially women in a higher social position than him. Even though he's built like a warrior, his personality's more like that of a chamberlain.

The two of them came back later in the evening and Shioriko was in a really good mood. They'd visited bookshops in Yokohama and Kawasaki, and apparently even stopped by Tsujidou on their way back.

She bought two boxes worth of books, and the one who carried them to entrance was, of course, Goura. He seemed a little tired, but his eyes were shining. Maybe seeing how pleased my sister was made him happy as well. Yep, just like a chamberlain.

I told my classmate Kosuga Nao about it when she came to hang out in my classroom for lunch today and she told me it's because my sister's 'no ordinary person.'

Nao always has a tense expression on her face when I talk about Shioriko. She's a regular customer at the shop, but I guess she's just bad at dealing with my sister.

She fell for a guy named Nishino from the light music club a while ago and was rejected, but I heard Shioriko and Goura were involved somehow. I don't really know what happened, but there was some kind of trouble, and Shioriko must have done something to scare her...I don't think she's gotten over that yet.

Nishino goes to some other school now.

After the incident with Shioriko, rumors started going around that he was a good for nothing guy who made moves on lots of girls behind the scenes. He thought Goura was the source of the rumors and tried to set fire to our shop in revenge.

Nishino transferred to another school as soon as his suspension

ended.

I can't really tell anyone, but it was my fault Nishino had that misunderstanding. I heard Goura talking to some regulars about what happened with Nao and carelessly told the people in my club about it. My story ended up being the final straw just as rumors were starting to spread about what Nishino had done. I later learned that Nao never told anyone at school what had happened. I had no idea she was keeping silent about the whole thing.

I guess I talk too much.

I thought it would be a bad idea to mention it after the store was almost set on fire, so I didn't say anything. I'm writing about it here instead so that the stress doesn't build up. No one knows I'm using the computer in the middle of the night like this.

The books Shioriko bought yesterday were still piled up near the entrance when I got back from school this afternoon. She can't carry heavy things up the stairs yet, and even though I volunteered to carry them up later, I had completely forgotten about them.

Anyway, I took all of them up to the second floor because otherwise they would get in the way of sweeping the entrance. The second floor hallway is now part of the Shioriko Zone and I can't do anything about the books lying all over the place. She'd probably get angry at me if I dropped her new books in one of the empty spots though.

I saw something nostalgic among the books in the hallway on my way back.

The King Has Donkey Ears.

It was a picture book that was read to me when I was younger. It was supposed to be mine, but it must have been absorbed into the Shioriko Zone at some point.

I couldn't remember what kind of story it was at all, so I took it back to my room to read it for the first time in a while. It's actually

pretty interesting.

A slightly clumsy king named Midas happened to pass by two gods having a music contest. Although the better player was obvious to anyone who listened, Midas declared that he preferred the worse player.

The god became angry because of that and cursed King Midas by transforming his ears into donkey ears (what a petty god). Midas hid his donkey ears out of embarrassment from everyone except his hairdresser; threatening to kill him if he ever dared to tell a soul (the king's pretty cruel too).

The hairdresser didn't tell anyone, but since he couldn't keep such a huge secret himself, he dug a deep hole near the riverbed and shouted "the king has donkey ears!" into the hole.

Reading that made me think.

I've been doing the same thing as the hairdresser by writing in the journal; secretly writing down all the things I can't tell the people around me.

This journal is my hole in the riverbed.

I don't know how long I'll be able to keep this up, but there isn't anyone at the bottom of the hole.

I think I'll leave it at that for today.

CHAPTER 1

YOUNG, ROBERT F. THE DANDELION GIRL. SHUEISHA BUNKO.

The freezing wind outside lightly shook the glass door at the entrance. The area should have been warmed by indoor heating, but perhaps due to the age of the building, my breath was still coming out white.

It was morning; the store had just opened for the day. There were barely any customers, and I was standing behind the counter, quietly tying hardcover books together with a cord. I had a random assortment of old literature collections, old diet magazines, and reference books with no covers—none of which were actually worth anything.

To be fair, I didn't know enough about books to make bold statements like that, but I was at least capable of making rough assessments.

My name is Goura Daisuke. I'm an employee at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, a secondhand bookstore that quietly does business in Kita-Kamakura. The seasons had changed twice since I started working here five months ago, and today was the 26th of December. It was almost the end of the year.

The Ofuna market district had been bustling with Christmas activity yesterday, but I didn't have the chance to be involved in any of it. I had to work overtime until late in the evening and didn't get back home until after everything was over. Christmas was the single busiest day of the year for the bookshop, so there really wasn't anything I could do about that. Everyone did their annual cleaning this time of year, so there was always an increase in the number of books that customers brought in to sell. We now had an

overwhelming number of books that still needed to be dealt with.

I say *we*, but I really only followed instructions since I was still learning the ropes. The shop owner was the one who actually decided what to do with the books.

“Nuu—”

I heard a strange noise just as I set the bundle of books on the counter in front of me. I looked towards the shelf for out of print books and saw a customer wearing a down jacket. Seeing as he also looked up with a puzzled expression, it was safe to say he wasn't the one who had made that noise. Obviously wasn't me either, which left the only other person in the shop.

I turned to look behind me.

Biblia was a fairly small store, but there was still a lot of space behind the counter relative to its size. It was necessary in order for us to organize the books we had in stock and to manage mail orders. There were several rows of books piled up like a wall, high enough to completely hide anyone sitting behind them. In fact, there currently was someone hidden behind them.

Two old volumes of girls' manga had been haphazardly placed on top the wall of books. Nishitani Yoshino's ***Olympus Laughs*** and ***Cousin Alliance***. It looked like the person behind the wall was piling them up...what on earth was she doing?

Before long, the cover of the manga she was holding came into view from behind the wall of books, followed by a white high-neck sweater. She stayed seated in her chair, but sat up to stretch widely with the book still in both of her hands.

She was a beauty well suited to the thick framed glasses she wore on the thin bridge of her nose. Her eyes were so tightly shut that her forehead creased, and the tips of her long black hair touched the floor.

From the way she bent backwards, I could clearly see the contours

of her body. Being aware of how other people would see her was another of her bad habits.

Her pressed lips opened just slightly.

“Nuu—”

The person making strange sounds as she stretched was none other than the owner of Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. Her name was Shinokawa Shioriko, and she had recently taken over the shop, which had been founded almost fifty years earlier.

Although she wasn't much older than I, who had only graduated from college this spring, she was also a “bookworm” who held an unparalleled knowledge of old books.

She cricked her neck, seemingly exhausted from managing web orders on the computer all morning. I watched her for a while until her eyes opened with a snap behind her glasses. She suddenly became aware of my presence.

“Ah....”

Her face flushed bright red and she hid behind her book. I didn't think there was anything to get so embarrassed about, but she had an extremely shy personality that didn't quite suit someone in the service industry. Barring the times when people came in to sell books, Shioriko often made me deal with customers. She usually hid herself with her computer behind the wall of books and managed web orders and the like.

“Umm...did you want me to take these books to the storehouse?”

When I spoke up, she peeked out from behind her book and looked down at the bundle I was asking about.

“N-no...could please you take them to the car instead?”

“The car...you mean the van?” I asked.

Books that weren't out on the shop floor were normally stored in one of the rooms in the main house.

“Yes...I was thinking of taking them out to the marketplace....”

“The market...the one in Totsuka?”

“Yes.”

“The marketplace” was officially called the Vintage Book Exchange Convention.

There were many different regional vintage book associations formed by bookstores that did business in the same area. The Vintage Book Exchange Convention was a system that allowed member stores to trade amongst themselves.

If someone had books that weren't selling well in their own shop, they could put them up in the convention-owned meeting hall and invite people in the same industry to purchase them. The specific convention they belonged to didn't matter so there were no problems with going to other marketplaces to trade if circumstances demanded it.

I looked at the calendar on the wall and tomorrow's date, Monday, December 27th, was circled in red. Biblia was associated with the Shonan branch of the Kanagawa prefecture association, which meant that we used the western vintage books convention building.

Tomorrow was the last day a convention would be held in 2010.

“Tomorrow's the day, I see,” I said. “It's my first time going to the Totsuka book exchange.”

We came into a large quantity of manga last month, and at Shioriko's instruction, put them up for sale at the Tokyo book exchange meeting. Her reasoning was that it would be better to present them in Tokyo, where there were more specialty manga stores.

“No...tomorrow's actually...we haven't finished organizing the books we got the other day. We'll have to wait until the first meeting next year before they can be taken out to the marketplace.”

I was a little disappointed. Even if it was for work, I was hoping the two of us would be able to go somewhere together.

“I see...” I nodded and got back to work.

“Ah, Daisuke.”

Shioriko called to stop me and held out a single book.

“Please add this to the bundle as well.”

She talked quickly without looking at me, and withdrew behind the shadow of her book. The plain slipcover she gave me had a book with a gray colored spine. It was Sakaguchi Michiyo’s ***Cra Cra Diary***. I was told it was a series of essays by Sakaguchi Ango’s widow reflecting on their married life.

She bought another copy?

This was a special book for Shioriko. It was one that even she, who loved books more than anyone, couldn’t bring herself to like. Even so, she bought the book time and time again, only to dispose of it each time.

I took the book out of the slipcover and began flipping through the pages. The book was in good condition and there wasn’t any writing on the inside. That is to say, this wasn’t the book Shioriko was searching for.

Ten years ago, Shinokawa Chieko left her daughter a copy of ***Cra Cra Diary*** and disappeared. Her enormous knowledge of books surpassed even her daughter’s, and with her quick wit, she was not someone to be underestimated.

I felt for her that she was still only a child. Being snatched away from her mother before she even reached four years of age was too sad. I was afraid to look at her dark round eyes—afraid I would remember her. Perhaps even now, I was hardening my resolve not to see her again for who knows how many years.

My eyes fell on a passage from ***Cra Cra Diary***. The author already had a daughter before she married Ango. She left the child with her

own mother and ran away to be with him.

Shioriko took the book itself to be a message from her mother—that she must have run off to be with some other man. The book was later put up for sale at the market without her ever reading through its pages.

However, there was the possibility that her mother had left a direct message to her daughter somewhere in the book. Shioriko was now trying to find the book she once lost so that she could know for sure.

Since the book had yet to appear in her search, there was a good chance that someone still had it. Of course, there was also the possibility that it had been thrown away.

...I was already crying.

Even if without a stupid mother like me around, you still have your kind grandmother. I'm sure you'll feel lonely; I know I will also miss you dearly. Perhaps you'll one day understand my feelings when you grow up. I am prepared to bear all of your resentment, but know that I only want you to grow up healthy. Although I'm ready to leave you behind, you mustn't cry when you remember me.

I spoke to the child in my heart and murmured.

Michiyo decided to leave her daughter for a long time even knowing that she would be making her daughter lonely and that she would be resented. She wrote down her true thoughts an almost cruel honesty. Did Shinokawa Chieko also have thoughts like that?

That person is Shinokawa Chieko...our mother.

What came back to me wasn't the voice of Shioriko, but that of her younger sister, Ayaka. I'd previously found a painting on the second floor of someone who had a striking similarity to Shioriko and Ayaka was the one who told me who the model was. She was a student at a nearby prefectural high school and was younger than Shioriko by about ten years.

If Shinokawa Chieko disappeared ten years ago, it would have

been when Ayaka was just about ready to start elementary school. She would have had to grow up separated from her mother just like the child in *Cra Cra Diary*.

Shinokawa Chieko, huh.

Since her surname was still Shinokawa, she must not have been removed from the family registry. Of course, it could also be that Ayaka called her that out of habit.

Thinking about it now, what was the relationship between their parents like? I hadn't heard a single word from the Shinokawa sisters. What did the previous store owner, their father, think of his wife's disappearance?

I wanted to know even more about this woman named Shinokawa Chieko. Knowing more would mean that I'd be able to understand Shioriko better. Part of the darkness she carried in her heart was related to her vanished mother—

I suddenly started to feel dizzy; I'd been staring at the passage in *Cra Cra Diary* while I thought. Although I did have an interest in books, I couldn't read text for very long. It was something like a condition of mine.

Although the relationship between me and Shioriko, between someone who liked hearing about books and one who loved talking about them, could be considered good, a relationship tied together only by books somehow didn't feel right. I didn't think it was fine for things to be this way forever.

I felt someone's presence at the counter when I closed the book and put it back into its case.

Looking up, saw a man in his 30's holding out two books. It was the customer in the jacket who had been in front of the shelf for out of print books. The two books he had were *Select Annual SF Masterpieces 2*, published by Sogen Mystery Bunko, and *Strange Tales*, published by Bunshun Bunko. Neither of the books had covers and they weren't worth much.

“Thank you very much.”

The man said nothing. We occasionally got customers who didn't like to talk. While there were many extremely chatty customers who came to the shop, there were also many who were quite reserved.

“Pretty cold out today, huh.”

I tentatively struck up a conversation and the man's eyes went wide for a moment. Perhaps he hadn't expected me to remember who he was. I wasn't someone who had an especially good memory or anything; this customer had almost accidentally left an impression on me. It was because he had the same large build as me as well as a similar hairstyle. There weren't many people I could see eye to eye with.

I put his books into a paper bag and handed over the change for his payment.

“Are the ones on that shelf the only out of print books you have?” The man suddenly spoke up. This was unusual for him.

“Ah, yes. That's right.”

“Are there any plans to replenish stock after this?”

“Were you looking for something in particular?” I asked.

I thought he was trying to point something out, but the customer shook his head.

“N-no, I just thought there weren't many good books is all.”

He left it at that, sounding disappointed, and left the shop with his books.

I paused my work and went to the paperback corner. *Pay attention if a normally quiet customer complains.* It was something my grandmother, with her long years of experience running a diner, had taught me. Quiet customers only said something when they couldn't take it anymore.

This doesn't look too bad...

I was puzzled. Many of the books we dealt with were old out of print publications. There were some open spots on the shelf, but it didn't feel like the books had changed from before. The situation didn't seem too terrible.

"We certainly don't have much selection..." I suddenly heard Shioriko's voice nearby.

She had come out from behind the wall of books at some point and was standing next to me. She held a cane in her right hand to support herself. Shioriko had been injured in an incident involving the first print of Osamu Daizai's *The Late Years* half a year ago, and her leg had yet to fully heal.

"Really?" I asked.

She put her fist near her mouth, a habit of hers when she was thinking.

"Um...which books did that customer buy just now?"

I told her the titles and Shioriko's expression clouded even further.

"I knew it. We just can't continue like this."

"What do you mean?"

"The books that are selling are the ones we've stocked recently. No one's really buying any of the other ones."

"Ah..."

Now that she mentioned it, I supposed it was true. Having stock go stale was a problem in and of itself.

"If we don't rotate our merchandise..."

I was thinking along those lines as well, but there weren't actually many options. Unlike other book stores, secondhand stores couldn't choose what types of books they got.

“I think we’ll need to go to the market tomorrow after all.” Shioriko decided.

“But didn’t you say we’d have to wait until next year to sell the books?”

“We’ll still do that next year....but the market isn’t just for selling your own books, you know.”

Ah, right. There would be many other bookstores presenting their products at the market—they weren’t just there to sell things, they could buy things, too.

“We might just be able to find a bargain.”

The following day was just as windy.

We set out for the vintage book exchange in Totsuka at about ten in the morning. Vehicles that couldn’t fit in the parking spaces were supposed to be lined up in front of the building, so I parked the van at the very end of the line and walked to the building with Shioriko.

The convention hall was in an old four story building; the market was held on the second floor. I could see people coming and going through the open window.

Cra Cra Diary, the book Shioriko was searching for, suddenly resurfaced in my mind. It had been sold at the market along with other books from Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia a long time ago, and had apparently been purchased by some bookstore. There probably wasn’t anyone who’d remember where a cheap book like that ended up though. If there had been, then Shioriko would have already found it. All traces of the book stopped at this building.

“Let’s go.” Shioriko and I crossed the street together.

Her gait was more certain now than it was when she was discharged from the hospital. Slowly but surely, her leg was starting to recover.

We saw some trolleys for transporting books lined up at the building entrance. The entrance also functioned as a smoking area, it seemed. There were ash trays scattered here and there.

A man with thin, wiry hair was glaring at an ash tray near the entrance as he smoked a cigarette. His hooked nose and sharp eyes were certainly eye catching and gave off an intimidating aura. Metal-framed glasses kept his unkempt hair in place.

Suddenly, I felt a tug on my jacket. Shioriko had stepped behind me and was lightly pulling on my sleeve. It looked like she was bad at dealing with this particular person and didn't want him to notice her.

Still, it wasn't like she could just walk past him without saying anything at all.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and walked up to the man, bowing deeply. I followed her lead and also lowered my head.

“Ah...M-Mr. Hitori, it's been a while...”

Hitori was evidently the name of his store. Bookstore owners were often addressed by the name of the shop they managed. I looked carefully at the nameplate on his chest and saw the words *Hitori Bookstore* printed on it. The name somehow sounded familiar.

Mr. Hitori didn't bother acknowledging Shioriko's greeting. He simply stubbed out his cigarette, pulled out another one from his coat pocket, and lit it.

What's this old guy's problem?

It seemed I was the only one appalled by his behavior. Finished with her greeting, Shioriko leaned on her cane and hurriedly entered the building.

Perhaps they had all just left or something, but there was no one sitting at the receptionist desk when we got there. Next to the desk, however, there was a shallow wooden shelf that held a number of nameplates. The nameplates were for all the stores that would be

participating in the vintage book exchange. Shioriko picked up two “Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia” plates and handed one of them to me.

“Please pin it somewhere clearly visible.”

“Ah, of course.”

Excepting special occasions, the only people allowed into the building were vintage book association members. The nameplate was proof of that membership.

What’s this?

I tried to pin the badge to my chest and was perplexed. Flipping it around, I saw that there was no pin. Was there some sort of special way to fasten it?

“...looks broken.”

The owner of Hitori Bookstore raised his voice. His irritation showed even on the wrinkles in his eyebrows. It was as if he was telling us to quickly get out of his sight.

“Thank you very much.”

I quickly thanked him, but he didn’t even bother looking at me.

“We can borrow this...”

Shioriko picked up one of the document clips scattered on the counter and handed it to me. I used that to affix the nameplate to my belt buckle. It didn’t look great, but there was nothing I could do about that.

We tried waiting for the elevator at the end of the short hallway, but it never came down. Left with no other choice, we decided to go up the stairs.

“Did something happen between you and that guy?”

I asked as we slowly ascended up the stairs. That Hitori seemed to dislike her a lot.

“A lot happened apparently and there was some bad blood between them...him and my mother, that is.” Shioriko answered quietly. “That’s why I don’t think he likes me either.”

“...”

I thought I could understand. Shioriko’s mother was the type of person who would do anything when it came to business. In the events concerning the purchase of Fujiko Fujio’s The Final World War, she even proved herself capable of breaking the law. It would come as no surprise if she also had disputes with other people in the industry.

“I’m not good with Hitori either...but I do still visit his shop often.”

“Eh? Why is that?”

She turned around at the stair landing. Her eyes shined behind her glasses and her pale face was tinged with a hint of red. It was almost like her depressed tone just now had been a lie.

“It’s because their selection is incredible! Hitori Bookstore deals mainly in mysteries and science fiction, but they also have an impressive number of magazine back issues and related material. It’s quite famous among enthusiasts in Fujisawa.”

I finally remembered when she mentioned Fujisawa. Of course I felt like I’d heard the name before; I had also visited once with her before.

“Is this by any chance the bookstore in Tsujidou? The one we stopped by one our way back last...”

“Yes! That’s the one! Wasn’t it amazing!?”

Shioriko nodded deeply and leaned forward, looking like she was about to fall.

“Now that you mention it...”

I ended up accompanying her last month as a result of a little bet we made. It couldn’t be called a date, but I did drive her around the

prefecture to the bookstores she wanted to visit. Hitori Bookstore was one of the shops we stopped by on our way back. It was next to Tsujidou station in Fujisawa city.

The shop wasn't much bigger than Biblia, but the way the books were arranged from corner to corner was impressive. None of the books were stacked on the floor, and each one was wrapped in wax paper and neatly stored on a shelf.

Shioriko spent a lot of time looking through the shelves from end to end and eventually bought what seemed like a mountain of old books. The person at the register at the time was a middle-aged lady working part time. The shop owner did not show himself even until the very end. He might have deliberately stayed out of sight that time.

"Does he also act like that at the shop?"

"Hitori rarely ever says anything to me, but he does at least give me the right change."

"Isn't that a given?" It would be a crime if he didn't give her back her change.

"You might be wondering why I go so often." Shioriko suddenly turned around right as she began climbing up the stairs again. She was still obviously excited.

"It's because their selection is just that amazing!"

Searching for books took precedence over everything else it seemed. I'd have expected nothing less from the bookworm.

—

The meeting space on the second floor was a lot wider than I thought it would be.

There were long tables set up in equal intervals, with piles and piles of books piled up on them. I saw shop employees turned buyers, walking around and weaving their way through the narrow

space between tables.

“Anyway...let’s take a look around.” Shioriko took the lead and walked out to the assembly hall.

She was met with an “It’s been a while,” or a “How are you today?” each time she passed someone. They were lighthearted greetings like those of family members that hadn’t seen each other in a long time. Shioriko herself frantically returned all their greetings.

It seemed that everyone knew each other by sight here. People made small talk as they carefully perused the products piled high on the tables.

There were all sorts of products put up for sale. The relatively new books and manga stood out, but there were also plenty of literature collections and scholarly works. There were old car catalogs, dusty world maps, and even what looked like a graduation album from the Taisho era on display. Not only that, there were adult magazines with DVDs and 18+ fan magazines on display as well. There were also things here and there that I wasn’t sure should even be allowed to be sold here.

“Did I ever give you an in-depth explanation of the marketplace?” Shioriko asked.

“Ah, no, you haven’t. At least not explicitly.”

All I knew was that it was an event for people in the secondhand books industry to buy and sell books with each other. This was only the second time I’d been to a marketplace.

“Alright, I’ll give you a proper explanation then. We don’t want to hinder others, so let’s go over there.”

She pulled on my sleeve and walked towards the window. This was the window I saw from the road earlier. The cars lined up in rows below reflected sunlight off their roofs.

“There are several ways to do transactions at this convention.

What's happening now is known as *bid placing*. The buyers look at the books put out for sale and, when they find things they're interested in, write the amount they're willing to pay on a slip of paper."

She began her explanation with an uncharacteristic lack of hesitation. It was almost like a switch had been flipped—Shioriko's personality changed completely whenever the subject turned to books.

"Every stack of books has an envelope next to it...like for example, that table right over there."

She looked towards the piles of manga stacked high on the table closest to us. There were about 30 books wrapped in cord on the table. They were arranged in stacks of four so that the spines were visible. I saw many recently serialized young adult manga like **GANTZ** and **Berserk** among them.

A yellow envelope, with the words "set of four" written on it in pencil, was attached to the centermost bundle. The numbers 4 and 9 were written right under that.

"The 'set of four' part refers to the number of books that are up for sale. Bundles of books are called sets. That set has four books, so it's labeled 'set of four.'"

I nodded. So some stores sold young adult manga in sets of four. A young shop employee stopped in front of the books and began inspecting the manga from top to bottom. After a while he snatched a blank form, scribbled on it with a pencil, quickly folded it, and inserted the paper into the envelope.

"I'm guessing he placed a bid just now?" I asked Shioriko after the shop employee left.

"Correct. He saw a book that he wanted and put his bid in the envelope. The person with the highest bid wins the right to buy the item. Of course, the money will go to the store that put the books up for sale."

“How come the store names aren’t written on any of the envelopes?”

I asked her about something I had been curious about for a while. The envelopes all had a general description of the books along with the quantity. There were also some other numbers that I didn’t understand.

“The point is to hide the names of stores that put out items. There are two numbers on each envelope. One refers to the item itself and the other refers to the store that put it up for sale...”

She pointed to an empty desk alongside the wall.

“Whenever someone wants to put up some books for sale, they first need to fill out a registration form over there. Then, they drop the form into the locked box next to that desk. The shop’s name is written only on that registration form, so there’s no way to tell which products belong to which store.”

“I see.”

But I wasn’t the one who spoke up. A thin man with a black high neck sweater had appeared next to us without me noticing. His short, black hair was neatly parted, and he had a thin beard and wore metal-framed glasses. He looked like a peevish modern Japanese teacher, but was wearing a bright red apron for some reason.

“I see even Shinokawa properly teaches people from time to time.” He nodded seriously, sounding impressed. He seemed a little older than Shioriko.

“Ah, Renjou, good morning.” Shioriko greeted him with a smile.

“Is your leg starting to heal?”

“Yes, it’s much better now.”

She looked towards me as she was speaking. I turned to “Renjou” before I could be introduced and lowered my head.

“My name is Goura Daisuke. I’m an employee at Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.”

“Ah, I’ve heard the rumors.”

The man stared at my face. Just what kinds of rumors had he heard? There was an uncomfortable silence.

“My bad. I never gave you my name. It’s Takino Renjou, written with the characters for lotus and cane. It’s kind of a strange name...I won’t mind if you laugh.” Takino Renjou smiled broadly as if inviting me to laugh, but I had no intention of doing so. I was more surprised by the fact that Shioriko had called him by his first name. I did remember her saying that she rarely had the opportunity to call members of the opposite sex by their first name—

No, if she said rarely ever, then there had to be at least a few.

“Renjou is the son of Takino Books in Kounandai.” Shioriko explained.

“We used to visit each other’s houses often when we were kids.”

Their parents were probably close as people in the same industry. Kounandai was two stops away from Ofuna on the Negishi line, and it wasn’t very far from Kita-Kamakura either.

“My younger sister and Shinokawa went to the same girl’s school. They were the ones that got along really well. Me and Shinokawa weren’t like that though; I was just an extra.”

“Not at all...you also helped me a lot, R-renjou.”

Shioriko earnestly denied it.

“No, I didn’t do much. Really.” Renjou looked at me seriously. He had noticed the delicate relationship Shioriko and I had and was teasing me a bit.

“So what brings you here today? Are you looking for books to buy?”

“Yes...I realized we didn’t have any good out of print books in

stock and...”

“Out of print...” Takino muttered. “Yeah, they’ve been very hard to come by these days. I guess that’s because people find it easier to sell books themselves on the internet.”

“Is that so...I see. That’s a shame.”

“I did see some today though.” Takino added.

“Eh? Where are they?”

“Over there.”

He started walking without even asking us to follow. He seemed to be a very carefree person. Shioriko and I followed after him.

“So where did you and my sister go to drink on your last day off?”

Takino looked over his shoulder and asked Shioriko.

“Ah...Ryu said there was a bar she found recently, in Yokohama.”

“She’s a handful when she’s drunk. Sorry if she caused you any trouble.”

“Oh, she’s not like that at all...”

I was shocked by their conversation.

“Shioriko, you drink?” I whispered to her. I started working at Biblia half a year ago and never heard anything about that. I had just assumed that she never drank alcohol.

“I’m not really good with alcohol, but I do like going out a lot.”

That’s how it was. I regretted my carelessness. Had I known this earlier, I wouldn’t have worried so much about how to invite her out.

“Um...in that case, next time why don’t we—”

“Here we are.”

Takino stopped walking, and my invitation was cut off. We had arrived at a table in the corner of the convention hall with books

lined up in stacks of five.

“Wow...”

Shioriko’s face suddenly lit up. She put her hand on the edge of the table and brought her face closer to the book spines.

“These are nice aren’t they? They’d be good in our store.”

I also stared at the piled up books next to them. About 70 percent of the books were by Hayakawa and Tsogen publishing, and the rest belonged to other publishing houses. There were also some Sanrio SF books mixed in among them. The envelope near the bundles had “Science Fiction Publications” and “Sets of Five” carefully written on it.

“The topmost books look really good. There are even some that could probably sell for more than ten thousand yen.”

“Are they all science fiction?”

“There’s fantasy, and also horror books... like this, for example. We’ve even sold it at our shop before.”

She said that and put her finger on the spine of the topmost books in the bundle. There was ***Shadow, Shadow on the Wall*** by Theodore Sturgeon, and ***Other Days, Other Eyes*** by Bob Shaw. The books leaned forward at her touch, perhaps because of how loosely they were bound.

“Were these really purchased from Biblia?” Takino asked.

“They might have been...if one of our customers wanted to sell their books though, I would have liked them to bring it back to us...”

Shioriko sighed. It seemed we didn’t just need regular customers to buy good books, we also needed them to sell good books as well. The store wouldn’t have well-stocked shelves otherwise.

Takino suddenly wrapped his arms around our shoulders. He brought his face close as if to wedge himself between us. I thought he was going to say something, but he had a faraway look in his

eyes and didn't move. It didn't seem like he was trying to huddle together.

"Um, what is it?" I asked.

"The truth is, I put out these books two days ago." He whispered.

"I bought them from a customer when I was watching the shop last week. We don't normally deal with these kinds of books, so I bought them to sell at the market."

"What kind of customer were they?" Shioriko got caught up in the mood and lowered her voice.

"It was a plain woman with glasses and short black hair. The type that really looked like she loved books...her address was in Hongoudai. Sound familiar?"

"No..."

"Then I guess it wasn't one of Biblia's regular customers. Well, bid on them if you'd like."

Takino said that as he was about to leave us, but Shioriko called out to stop him.

"Renjou, does Hitori know about these books?"

I remembered the grumpy looking man we met at the entrance. He would probably desperately want these out of print books, since his store specialized in science fiction and mystery novels.

"I didn't see him at the convention hall today...is he here?"

"We saw him smoking near the entrance."

"I see...in that case, he might have put his bid in sometime yesterday. That guy was here to put up some of the products from his shop for sale, you know. He's kind of hard to miss."

Takino left it at that and went off somewhere else.

"...Hitori will pay a high price for books like these. We'll need to be prepared in order to win this bid."

Shioriko pinched the envelope that had “Science Fiction” books written on it. It looked like she was estimating how many bids were in there by the thickness of the envelope.

“There seem to be many other shops besides Hitori interested in it. It’s fairly popular.”

She tightly closed her eyes. It looked like she was making mental calculations.

That’s when I noticed a white haired man wearing a grey coat standing near the convention hall door. It was the owner of Hitori Bookstore that we happened to see earlier this morning. He was glaring sharply at Shioriko.

I felt a chill along my back. I knew that he had a bad relationship with Shioriko’s mother, but there was a chance that he also held resentment towards her daughter as well. I stood between him and Shioriko to hide her and blocked his glare.

He noticed me returning his gaze, and with an angry scowl, once again disappeared from the assembly hall.

“Daisuke, is something wrong?” Shioriko had opened her eyes again at some point.

“...no, not really.”

“Could I ask you to write down the price I’ll tell you on the bid slip? I can’t do it while holding the cane.”

“Ah, of course.”

I took one of the bid slips on the table into my hand. There were similar bundles of small memo papers at every table.

I thought about the owner of Hitori Bookstore while Shioriko instructed me on how to fill out the form. Just what had happened in her mother’s—Shinokawa Chieko’s time? It couldn’t be that they just didn’t get along; there had to be something more to it. Perhaps it was something that Shioriko herself was not even aware of.

The unsealing of the bids began at 11am.

That said, bidding didn't stop for the entire convention hall. Sections were closed one at a time so that the envelopes containing the bids could be opened. The lots would then go to the highest bidder and the winning shop would be announced.

Once the first section was done, they would move over to the next section and begin the unsealing process there; bidding could still continue in the other sections in the meantime. Shioriko and I only were only interested in the out of print books from before, so we waited for the bids to be opened in our corner of the convention hall.

Red and white poles, similar to those used at construction sites, were set up between the tables. After that was done, the convention employees split up into groups of two or three to open up the envelopes one at a time. Takino, who we had spoken with earlier, was among them.

"Speaking of which, why is Takino also working?"

"He's working as a manager today."

"Manager?" I replied with a question.

"The vintage book exchange is usually run by managers, people who are sent out from shops affiliated with the association. This often ends up being a learning opportunity for those just getting into the industry, since they get to work with so many different shops. I used to be a manager myself until last year."

She stopped at last year, which was when her father had passed away. She probably no longer had time to commit to managerial duties after she started managing Biblia alone.

"...this marketplace and association is unique to the used books industry in Japan. They say it was based on the bookstore guilds of the Edo era...but I've heard that cooperative trade guilds like this

aren't very common in the west these days..."

A thought suddenly occurred to me as I listened to her explanation.

"Do you think I could also be a manager?"

Shioriko paused slightly before replying.

"I believe you could...if you plan on continuing to work at Biblia for a long time, that is."

My words got caught in my throat. I couldn't clearly say that I wanted to do it.

"Ah, it looks like the bids were unsealed. Let's go take a look." Shioriko grabbed her cane and started walking.

The reason I started working at the shop wasn't because I wanted to work at a bookstore. There was the fact that I hadn't been able to find any other job, but more than anything else, I was drawn to this peculiar bookshop owner and the books she talked about. I didn't even have the ability to read books in the first place.

I couldn't confidently say that I was the right person to hire for the job, or even if I'd be able to do it right at all. It was the conclusion anyone would have come to.

"Ahhh," Shioriko's shoulders dropped as she stood in front of the bidding envelope by the out of print books. The entry with the highest bid had been posted, but it wasn't the one we had submitted. The name "Inoue" was scribbled right next the numbers on the slip.

"...that's Hitori's name." Shioriko said. In other words, Hitori Books had won the bid and Shioriko had lost.

"It looks like he also put in a three-bid..."

There were three separate numbers lined up on Hitori Bookstores' bid slip. All of them five digits. According to what I was taught earlier, people could enter multiple bids if they were bidding on an

expensive lot. The rules here at the market had it so that a maximum of three bids could be put in for lots worth 10,000 yen or more—that was what we called a “three-bid”. Shioriko and I had also put in a three-bid earlier.

“Yes, and we lost to his high-bid...what a shame.”

“High-bid?”

“The highest amount in a three-bid is called a high-bid. After that come the mid-bid, with the lowest amount being called the low-bid....look at this please.”

Shioriko pointed to the highest number among the three listed. Someone had drawn a circle around it, meaning the lot had been won with Hitori’s high-bid.

“Hm?”

Now that I looked at it, the entry with “Inoue” written next to it wasn’t much different from the amount Shioriko had asked me to write earlier—there was only a difference of 10 yen. We would have won had we increased our bid amount by just a little.

“We lost by just a hige...” Shioriko said bitterly.

“Hm? hige?”

I felt bad asking her so many questions, but there was too much industry specific jargon that I didn’t understand.

“Units of 10 yen are called *higes*”

“My plan was to put in a bid that was 1000 yen higher than what Hitori was likely to submit just in case, but it seems I misread him...”

“Maybe he correctly guessed the bid we were going to put in.”

Just like the way we tried to predict the bid Hitori was going to put in, Hitori must have guessed ours.

Shioriko however, shook her head.

“I don’t believe that’s the case. Hitori put his bid in yesterday it

seems...this was purely due to a difference in buying power.”

Shioriko despondently touched the spines of the books. The opening of the bids was more or less completely done and people around us were beginning to take their items. Coming here turned out to be a waste of time.

A white haired man wearing a coat appeared and almost bumped into the table as he stopped his trolley next to it. Shioriko’s shoulders shook in fright. It was the owner of Hitori Books, Inoue.

“What are you doing?”

“No-nothing real—“

“Keep your hands off my books.”

Shioriko took a step back at his threatening voice.

“I-I’m sorry....ah!”

Shioriko lost her balance and I hurriedly supported her. It was too easy for her to fall over if she wasn’t careful. I glared at Inoue who was now loading his books onto his trolley.

“We were looking at the bids. Are there any problems with that?”

Inoue stood straight up and stared intently at my face. His brow was wrinkled even further in disagreeableness.

“You must be Goura.”

“Huh?”

Why did he know my name? I didn’t remember ever introducing myself to him.

“You should be careful around that woman.”

He didn’t even wait for a response and pushed his trolley away, leaving the convention hall.

“What was that guy talking about?”

I didn’t know what he was trying to say. Why did I need to be

careful around Shioriko?

“W-well....umm...Daisuke...”

“Yes?”

“I’m alright now...people are staring at us.”

I came back to my senses. I still had my arm wrapped around her lower back from when I stopped her from falling over. Shioriko’s face was bright red and she was looking at her feet.

“Ah, I’m sorry.” I quickly let go of her.

“Oh, here you were, Shinokawa.”

Takino pushed his way to the crowd and approached us.

“The books that Biblia put up for sale ended up being a bō.”

“...huh?”

Shioriko’s eyes went wide. It seemed something unexpected had happened.

“That can’t be right...”

“But they’re right over there. That pile of hardcovers.”

Since I couldn’t understand what was happening, I had to cut into their conversation.

“....excuse me, but what’s a bō?”

“They’re lots that didn’t get a single bid after they were put up for sale, but...” Shioriko answered.

I could now see why Shioriko was confused. That didn’t make any sense because *Biblia hadn’t put anything up for sale this time.*

“Umm...Renjou, are you sure that it belongs to us?” Shioriko asked.

“Yeah, the product registration paper had Biblia written on it. This way, follow me.”

We followed Takino over to the other side of the convention hall. There were barely any books remaining on the tables. I had no idea

where they got the board from, but some shop owners had begun playing shogi in the corner after they finished putting away their merchandise.

“Here they are.”

There were some old books stacked on top of a table near the window. They were mostly practical guides, like sample letter collections, a guide on marriage customs, and accounting certification books. A good number of them were badly yellowed and not a single one looked like it was worth buying.

“What is this?” Shioriko asked in a whisper.

Takino said Biblia had put out these books, but she didn’t recognize them at all.

“Most of these were published about ten years ago...” She muttered to herself with her eyes shut.

“Either way, I’d like to clear this table. Could you quickly get them out of the way?” Takino was leaning on the window with his hand on his chin.

“But these books aren’t even ou—“

Before she could finish her sentence, Takino, who happened to be looking out the window, opened his eyes wide.

“Ah, I’m sorry! It looks like someone’s about to park illegally!” His loud voice rang out in the room.

As soon as he said that, the shop owners in the convention hall rushed over to the window to see what was going on. Shioriko and I moved to the end of the aisle. Now that he mentioned it, most of the cars were parked in the street today. We looked at each other now that our conversation had been cut off midway.

“What are we supposed to do now?”

“What should we do indeed...” Shioriko also looked like she was at a loss.

Organizing the counter was the first thing I did when the shop opened for the day. I cleared out some space and set down the books we ended up picking up from the book exchange. The storeroom in the main house was full, so there was no choice but to temporarily keep them in the shop.

A day had passed since the convention ended, but we still didn't know where these books had come from. The association didn't want to keep them, and disposing of the books would cost money. It wasn't like throwing the books away without knowing who they belonged to was an option in the first place though.

The association decided to have us hold on to the books until they sorted this out since on paper, the books belonged to us. Not only did we fail to get the out of print books we wanted, we also ended up getting stuck with a heap of books that weren't even fit to sell. Then, we even got stuck with a parking ticket on the van since it was parked on the road. Talk about getting kicked while we were down.

Still, I was curious about who could have put the books up for sale in Biblia's name. It was hard to believe this could just be a mix up in the documentation, but I also couldn't think of a reason why anyone would do it on purpose. Not even Shioriko, who was good at solving mysteries like this, could say she knew.

I crouched and stared at the books on the counter. Shioriko's mother apparently had the ability to understand what kind of person someone was just by looking at the books they owned. I didn't have the same ability, of course, but I figured that there might be something that could be found by looking at the covers.

My impression hadn't changed much from when I first saw them. They were just a bunch of practical guides in terrible shape. That being said it wasn't like there was nothing noteworthy about them. There were several titles that dealt with antiquarian books in the

heap. Titles like *The Art of Antiquarian Books*, *Registry of out of Print Books and Introduction to Used Books in Your Town*. That was to say, the person who left these behind was someone who was interested in old books—

No, that makes no sense...

I shook my head and stood up. Those were the characteristics of the person who originally owned the books, not the characteristics of the store that put them up for sale. There was no point in looking at things from that angle.

Then, the door leading to the main house opened and Shioriko appeared. She was wearing a knit dress with a thin ribbon on her chest today. She looked cuter than usual, but also less cheerful than she usually was.

“Please put these books in vinyl covers and put them out on the floor. The price has already been labeled.”

She sighed and handed me a department store bag with eight or nine books in it. They all had price labels affixed to them in various spots.

“Where did you get these”?

“They’re out of print books that I took from my room...I already have duplicates and brought them here because they looked like they’d sell. There should be other books like this, so I’ll also bring those down later.”

In other words, she was pulling these books from her own personal collection. She must have decided to let go of them to fill the shelves. I emptied the bag and laid the books out on the counter. There were mystery and science fiction books like F.W Croft’s *The Groote Park Murder* and Anna Kavan’s *Julia and the Bazooka*. I had the vague feeling that I once saw her reading *Julia and the Bazooka* when she was still in the hospital.

Hm?

There was also a strangely showy book among them. It featured

an illustration of a young girl wearing a white dress under the title *The Dandelion Girl*, which was written in pink text. According to the subtitle, it was the second part of a foreign science fiction masterpiece collection, which meant it wasn't written by a Japanese author. Looking at it carefully, I saw that it was published under Shueisha's Cobalt imprint. I thought they focused mostly on books for middle and high school girls, but it seemed they also had books of value in second hand stores.

I looked over the book to check the price label attached to it—8,000 yen. This was easily the most expensive book among them.

“Why is this particular book so expensive?”

“Ah, that one!”

Shioriko's voice suddenly rose sharply.

“That's because it has Robert F. Young's *The Dandelion Girl* in it! It's a truly amazing story that even has elements of time travel!”

She shook her closed fists as she spoke. Shioriko always had a switch flip whenever she talked about books, but seemed to be especially excited this time. I guess she liked this story a whole lot.

I was also now excited and leaned forward. Time travel meant going back or forth in time. Of course I'd be interested.

“So do the characters go to the future or the past?”

“To the past I suppose...but it's not the main character that travels through time. The protagonist is a very ordinary middle-aged man who happened to be staying at a mountain cottage for the summer holidays. His wife had something urgent come up suddenly which left him so bored that he didn't know what to do with himself. It was on one of those uneventful days that he met a beautiful girl with blonde hair and a white dress on a nearby hill.”

I looked down at the cover of the book. So this was that girl. The dress kind of resembled the clothes Shioriko wore, but the hair color was completely different.

The girl told him that she came from 240 years in the future using a time machine that her father built. She liked that hill in the protagonist's era and time traveled back to the same period every day. From the perspective of those living in the protagonist's era, it looked like she just happened to appear on the hill. Do you know what she said during her first meeting with the protagonist?

Shioriko brought her face closer to me, as if she were telling me a secret. I could see her eyes twinkling with excitement with her face so close to mine.

“Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.”

My heart was pounding.

“T-that’s pretty nice. I-it’s amazing.”

“Isn’t it? Anyone would fall in love being told something cute like that right? “

She smiled without a hint of concern, clearly unaware of what she herself was doing.

“...What happened after that?”

“The protagonist ended up accepting it as just her imagination and played along with her story. Through their everyday conversations, the protagonist quickly found himself falling in love with the girl almost half his age. However, one day, she vanished without a trace. The protagonist felt conflicted between his feelings for the girl and his feelings of guilt for his wife. The next time he saw the girl on the hill, she was wearing a black dress.”

I thought for a moment.

“Was it because of her father’s funeral?”

“That’s right. Her father who made the time machine had passed away, and she now had no way to make replacement parts. She explained that she might not be able to time travel anymore and

returned to the present prepared for the fact that she might never see each the protagonist again...”

Shioriko’s expression suddenly shadowed over as if she had remembered something.

“My father liked *The Dandelion Girl* and used to read it often. That’s why I also wanted to have my own copy as well...it wasn’t easy to find, though.”

She slowly stroked the cover with her index finger. *The Dandelion Girl* was in such good condition that it didn’t look like she had obtained it so many years ago. It was clearly a book that she treasured a lot.

“Are you really alright with selling it?”

“I’m sure there are other customers who would also want it... besides, I still have one more copy.”

I swallowed my words. She still had *one more copy* of an out of print book that took her a long time to find. The remaining book was most likely a memento of her late father.

“...how does the story continue?”

“The girl promised that she would try her best to come and see him again, and then she confessed her love to the protagonist before returning to the future. She never appeared on the hill ever again.”

“Wha-, is that it?”

The story really didn’t have much of a payoff. Still, if she had come back, he might have ended up doing something immoral.

“No, there’s more. The story continues from there.”

I was even more interested in Shioriko’s story. How would the story continue if the girl returned to the future and couldn’t meet the protagonist again?

Just as I was about to urge her to continue and tell me what happened next—

“Heey, when are you guys going to be done?”

A voice called out from the open door into the main house. A ponytailed girl had sat down at the end of the hallway and had one hand resting on her chin. She had distinctively large eyes and tanned skin and was wearing an old jersey and some work gloves. This was Shioriko’s younger sister, Shinokawa Ayaka.

“I’ve been waiting since Shioriko asked me to help take out some books. We’re still not done with the end of year cleaning, you know. We still have to clear out the ventilation fans, polish the bathroom tiles, and repair the paper doors! There isn’t much time until the year ends!”

Come to think of it, Shioriko had said earlier that she was going to take some books off the shelf. It was probably inconvenient for her to do it herself because of her bad leg.

“Ah, Aya, I’m sorry...:

“Sorry, it’s because I asked Shioriko about a book.”

I apologized and Shioriko hurriedly shook her hands in front of her.

“No, it’s not Daisuke’s fault, Ayaka....I always end up doing this and...”

“—It’s the same either way!”

Ayaka tore apart our excuses.

“Really, it doesn’t even matter! I just want to get this over with quickly! Shioriko, come with me.”

“A-alright...”

Shioriko disappeared into the main house, dragged away by her sister. Left alone in the shop, I picked up ***The Dandelion Girl*** and turned to the opening page.

The girl on the hill made Mark think of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Perhaps it was because of the way she stood in the afternoon sun, her dandelion-hued hair dancing in the

wind; perhaps it was because of the way her old-fashioned white dress swirled around her long and slender legs. In any event, he got the definite impression that she had somehow stepped out of the past and into the present.

Perhaps it was because it was a translated work, but the text definitely drew my interest. I missed the chance to hear the rest from Shioriko, but was still curious about how the story ended. I could read just the ending—no, that would be too boring. It was a short story, so maybe I'd be able to read it all in one go. But I was still in the middle of work, even if there were no customers at the moment...

The phone rang while I was still trying to make a decision. I picked up the phone, but before I could say the store name, the person on the other end began to talk.

“This is Takino from Takino books....err...is this Goura?”

“Yes it is. Thanks for your help yesterday.”

“What's Shinokawa up to?”

“She's in the main house right now. Should I call her over?”

“Yeah, if you could.....actually, wait! I can talk to you instead; there's no real reason to tell Shinokawa directly. Do you have a moment?”

I had a bad feeling about Takino's serious tone. I gripped the phone receiver.”

“Of course.”

“There were some books you guys bid on yesterday. They were out of print books that Inoue from Hitori Books won.”

“Yeah.”

We lost the bid for those books by only 10 yen. Had we won, Shioriko would not have had to put up her own books for sale.

“The truth is, Inoue just left my shop. I'm calling about those books.”

“He stopped by...your store?”

“Rather than saying he stopped by, it would be more accurate to say he stormed in...this is quite a problem.”

“Did something happen?”

The bad feeling I had grew worse.

“Yeah, this has turned into an incident, more or less.”

“Incident...?”

“Ah, My bad. If there are missing pages, or pages have been cut, or someone otherwise finds an extreme deficiency with their items after they win a bid, we call it an *incident*. Kind of like finding out you have a defective item after you’ve already purchased it. It seems Inoue found that one of the books that was definitely in the lot when he put in his bid was missing when he returned after winning the bid. It was a fairly expensive book, so he came to me first to get information about the books that were put up for sale.”

“So is the book just lost?”

“I’m not sure myself, but Inoue is certain that it was stolen. I personally don’t think that’s the case though. The only people allowed to enter and exit the assembly hall are association members, and we all know each other by sight. There’s no way it could have been stolen.

Thoughts swirled in my head as I listened to Takino. I didn’t quite understand what he was getting at. What did this have to do with me and Shioriko?

Before that though, I had forgotten to ask an essential question.

“By the way, do you know which book is missing?”

“*The Dandelion Girl*, by Cobalt publishing, apparently. Have you heard of it?”

I couldn’t help my gasp of surprise.

“*The Dandelion Girl*...you mean the foreign romantic science fiction story?”

“Oh, you’re well informed. I heard that you didn’t know much about books.”

“Ah, it’s just a coincidence.” I replied ambiguously. The book was right in front of me, so it’s not like I was really well informed or anything.

“Was it really stolen?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean, was *The Dandelion Girl* really one of the books he won in the first place? What if Hitori made a mistake...”

That was the first possibility that came to me. If he had made a mistake, then that would bring this to an easy conclusion. But Takino rejected that idea.

“I made records when I appraised the books just in case. I didn’t know much about out of print science fiction and didn’t appraise it highly as a result. The customer told me that I could buy the book for any price I wanted.”

“The person who sold it wasn’t an enthusiast?”

I was pretty sure Takino told us books were sold to him by a 30-something year old woman with glasses who looked like she loved books. If she were an enthusiast, she would have been pickier about the selling price.

“She told me she wasn’t interested in books as much as she used to be. Apparently, she got divorced and decided to move out. That’s why she wanted to quickly get rid of unnecessary things and get away from the house. It seems got into frequent arguments with her ex-husband even though they had lived together for a decade...she had quite a lot of complaints.”

These were pretty brutal circumstances for a Cobalt imprint book, but I guess that's just how reality was.

"The question now is who could have stolen the book. Inoue, for some reason, suspects that Shinokawa did it."

An unpleasant sweat ran across my back despite the cold inside the shop.

"W-why is that?"

"I don't know. He was saying that Shinokawa's daughter wouldn't hesitate to do something like this—that she was two-faced just like her mother. I tried to persuade him that Shinokawa wasn't the type of person to touch other people's belongings, but..."

I could hear a sigh over the phone.

"I plan on informing the directors of the association about this incident. I told Inoue that too, but I want you guys to be careful just in case. Step in for Shinokawa if things start to look bad. Call me if it still seems hopeless after that."

"Got it."

I couldn't help but think about the accusation leveled at Shioriko.

Like Takino, I also had the firm belief that Shioriko would never steal anyone's books. She herself had been injured by a man who would not only steal, but would do anything to get his hands on a first edition book she owned. She hated this sort of crime more than anyone else I knew.

The one thing I was concerned about was the fact that she had brought out ***The Dandelion Girl***. Of all the books that Hitori bought, it was the one that had to disappear. With this timing, it would be hard to dismiss it as a coincidence a coincidence that Shioriko happened to pull ***The Dandelion Girl*** off her shelf today.

"Hello...are you still there?" Takino's voice brought me back to my senses.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Right. It’s no big deal, but I couldn’t say this while Shinokawa was still around. I wanted to say that I’m glad you started working at Biblia.” Takino sounded serious.

“...Why is that?”

“Shinokawa is shy around strangers, and she becomes talkative when it’s about books. She’s very good at her job, but can’t open her heart to the other shop owners no matter how she tries. She hired other part timers in the past, but they tended not to stay long due to problems in communication.”

I had heard a bit about this from Shioriko before. Apparently they couldn’t deal with her talking about books so much and quit.

“And then that happened, she injured her leg. All of us in the association were worried that the shop was going to fold....well, not everyone exactly. But it was a huge relief that the part timer who started in the summer had continued working, and the shop somehow managed to stay open.”

When he said that not everyone was worried, he was probably talking about Hitori. I suddenly remembered the conversation I had with him.

“Did everyone already know my name?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Inoue called me “Goura” yesterday, but that was the first time we met.”

“There were rumors about you, but I only heard that there was a part timer who had miraculously worked there for a while. I don’t think anyone knew your name or your face. Even I, though I’m well acquainted with Shinokawa, only met you for the first time yesterday.”

“Is that so...”

That was even stranger. Where did he learn my name then?

“Anyway, Shinokawa trusts you. I say this because I’ve known her for a long time. Besides her father, you’re probably the guy she’s opened up her heart to the most. I’m serious.”

“But what about you?”

I got caught up in the moment and asked without thinking. It was almost in a brotherly way, but Takino seemed to be intimate with Shioriko. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he said they used to go out.

“Ah, I hear that a lot.” Takino clicked his tongue.

“I have a rule against talking to Shinokawa too much. Both of us like books, so our conversations used to often go in that direction, but our tastes don’t match....if I had to say, she likes heart-rending stories, or should I say stories that are really bursting with emotion.”

Now that he mentioned it that did seem to be the case. ***The Dandelion Girl***, which I still had in front of me might be considered a “heart-rending story.”

“I, on the other hand, prefer weird, or more nauseating stories. Stuff like horror and suspense, right. Shinokawa read a lot of that too, but she had a habit of looking for meanings within the violent stories. We had a huge argument about the interpretation of the final chapter of a book a long time ago, and we’ve been distant since then.”

“Final chapter?”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, but it’s a story about an absurdly violent delinquent...”

A light bulb went off in my head at that. I didn’t read it myself, but I did know the story.

“Are you talking about ***A Clockwork Orange*** by any chance?”

“You really *do* know a lot!” Takino’s voice rose excitedly.

“Yeah, we were arguing about whether or not that final chapter was necessary. I was of the opinion that it was completely unnecessary, and Shinokawa argued that it was. Did she talk to you about it?”

“Kinda, but not really.”

There was a small incident concerning Anthony Burgess’s ***A Clockwork Orange*** in this very shop about 3 months ago, but it wasn’t something I’d be able to explain easily.

The final chapter was one where the “absurdly violent” protagonists reformed himself and strived to become a better person. For a long time, only the version with the final chapter omitted had been sold in Japan.

“I don’t know what you mean by “kinda not really,” but you’re amazing. It’d be fine even if you started dating Shinokawa tomorrow, you have my blessings.”

“Wha-!!” I found myself shouting into the phone. Even I thought that was an overreaction.

“Well, that’s only if she’s willing to go along with it.”

That was true.

Even if I wanted to go out with her, Shioriko didn’t have any interest in relationships. She told me before that she never wanted to get married to anyone. She said that it was in case she ever turned out to be like her mother.

I turned around and looked towards the door leading to the main house to make sure that Shioriko hadn’t come back yet.

“What kind of people were Shioriko’s parents?”

My plan was to ask about the Shinokawa sisters’ mother, Shinokawa Chieko, in a roundabout way. Takino should know something since he had been involved with the family.

A sigh could be heard on the other side of the receiver.

“I’m guessing you want to hear about her mother’s disappearance.”

“You got me.”

“I see...they had a good relationship. That was just how it looked to me though.” Takino spoke slowly as he reflected on his memories.

“Since her father was a fairly silent person, I talked a lot with her mother. She had a bright personality...and we both like books, so we often talked about them when there were no customers around.”

“So were the two of them the only ones running the shop?”

“I suppose. Shinokawa’s dad had been retired for as long as I could remember. I heard Biblia starting becoming really profitable when her mother started working there, but there were quite a few people, like Inoue, who weren’t fond of her.”

Takino went silent. He seemed hesitant about whether or not he should continue. Then, I heard some shuffling and the sound of other voices on Takino’s end. I heard him apologize and ask someone if they’d be able to wait for a moment.

“Sorry, that was a customer. Let’s talk again when I have more free time. Don’t forget to be careful around Inoue. Bye!”

Takino quickly ended the conversation and hung up. Biblia on the other hand, didn’t have any customers as usual. It was now dead silent.

Something’s odd.

Too many strange things had been occurring ever since we went to the marketplace yesterday. There were the books that were allegedly put up for sale by Biblia, the book stolen from the lot that Inoue won, and the fact that Shioriko was now trying to sell her own copy of *The Dandelion Girl*—something told me all of these incidents were related somehow.

But it wasn't like I'd be able to figure out how they were all linked. First, it would be a good idea to consult someone who would be able to come to a conclusion and could understand what had happened.

"Excuse me...I'm back."

Shioriko had once again returned from the main house. She was holding a paper bag like the one from earlier.

"Who was that on the phone?" She asked.

I realized that I still hadn't put the receiver down. I set it in front of the phone and took the bag full of books from her.

"It was Takino."

"Renjou? That's unusual, did something happen?"

"The truth is, there was some commotion about theft at the market yesterday."

"Eh! Really?" Her eyes went wide behind her glasses. No matter how I looked at it, she seemed genuinely surprised.

I gave her a brief summary of what I had heard from Takino, that ***The Dandelion Girl*** was reported to have been stolen. She asked if that book was really part of the lot that Hitori won, and quietly looked at the blue bag on the countertop. I couldn't tell what she was thinking from her expression.

"Um...about the copy of ***The Dandelion Girl*** here...."

I wanted to ask if it were a pure coincidence or if there were some other circumstances, but while I was thinking about how to phrase the question, the glass door at the entrance suddenly opened.

A piercingly cold wind blew into the shop and a white haired man wearing a long coat buttoned up to his neck appeared. He wasn't wearing glasses today, and was instead gripping a thick steel cane. This was unmistakably the owner of Hitori Books.

"Ahh..."

Shioriko let out a frightened voice. I was also shocked into silence. I never expected him to show up so quickly. Inoue took large steps, barely using his cane, and approached us. By the time I thought to react, it was already too late.

His eyes fell on *The Dandelion Girl*, which now had a price tag on it, and his face turned red with rage.

“I knew you were behind this!” He shouted at Shioriko.

She hid herself behind me and tightly gripped my arm. She was unable to speak from shock and fear.

“...I’m sorry, what do you mean?”

I adjusted my posture and asked him as calmly as I could. I was ready to restrain him on the off chance that he flew into a rage. He didn’t look very strong, but that steel cane in his hand was bound to be a problem.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. That woman stole a book from me at the convention yesterday. She stole it from the lot I won!”

“Y-you’re wrong...t-that’s my...”

“That doesn’t mean she stole it though.” I denied his accusation in Shioriko’s place. I could see her nodding a little from the corner of my eye.

“Don’t mess with me. You’re trying to tell me it’s just a coincidence?”

“...that’s what I think.”

I honestly didn’t know if I could say it was all *just* a coincidence, but I couldn’t insist on anything in this situation. I quickly added so he wouldn’t notice my doubts.

“I think it’s unlikely that someone would go as far as stealing a book with so many eyes watching.” I repeated what I heard from Takino earlier. Inoue’s eyes narrowed. It looked like I had somehow

managed to calm him down.

“That Takino boy’s been running his mouth, I see...” Inoue clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“She did have an opportunity to steal the book, if that’s what you’re talking about. When I returned to the convention hall before the bids were unsealed, I saw her hiding behind your huge body. Was there anyone else nearby then?”

That caught me by surprise. Certainly, it was true that I had moved to hide Shioriko from his view when I caught him glaring at her. The books had been in a corner, so there weren’t many other eyes on us.

“Something like that can’t be used as evide-”

“It’ll become clear sooner or later when I open an investigation. You’re also going to share the blame for clumsily trying to cover for her. Do you honestly believe that woman’s innocent façade?”

I probably knew Shioriko’s other sides better than he did. Previously, in order to protect her first edition copy of Daizai Osamu’s *The Late Years* from a book fanatic named Tanaka Toshio, she concealed the truth from everyone around her—including the police, putting herself in danger in the process. When things came down to it, she also had the courage to follow through.

“She’s Shinokawa Chieko’s daughter; she’s similar to her right down to her appearance.” Inoue sounded frenzied. Looking at him now, his fingers and jaw were trembling.

I finally understood. The issue wasn’t just that he had horrible experiences with Shioriko’s mother. He was afraid because this girl who resembled her mother so much was just like her.

Shinokawa Chieko was the type of person who would resort to threats and extortion to get the books she wanted. Inoue might have been one of her victims at one point.

“Shioriko is in no way a criminal.” I declared. I had complete faith

that it was true.

“What makes you trust her so much? Did you fall for her charm or something?”

I could feel her heart pounding violently on my arm as she tightly clung to me. There was something touching my elbow which made it even harder to focus on the conversation.

“No...it’s not that...” There was another reason.

“Alright, what’s your proof then?”

I couldn’t think of what to say. The truth was that I was also about to ask Shioriko what she thought earlier...but I would only trouble her if I asked for evidence now.

“What’s wrong? Let me hear it.” Inoue pressed for an answer.

Shioriko’s shaking which was being transmitted through my arm had now stopped. She was waiting for my answer with bated breath. It was clear we wouldn’t get past this if I didn’t answer.

“I know for a fact that she didn’t steal it.”

“What’s with that? I asked you for evi-”

“If she really were the criminal, she wouldn’t have stopped at just one. She would have taken each and every rare book!”

I was confused by my own words the moment I said them. That wouldn’t work as a defense at all. In fact, it sounded like I was criticizing her.

Inoue, however, let out a worn out sigh.

“I see...”

It seemed that was actually a good enough answer for him. That was unexpected.

“But if what you’re saying is true, then it means someone else stole the book.”

“Well...I suppose.”

“That’s why you’ll need to find the real thief before the end of the year.”

“Huh?” I was at a loss for words. That was a completely unreasonable demand.

“If you can’t find the culprit by then, I’ll go to the police and have them investigate. I’ll hold on to this book until then. It’s evidence, after all.”

Inoue picked up *The Dandelion Girl* up from the counter and walked out of the store before we could stop him. He didn’t even bother closing the door. Shioriko and I were left alone in the shop, which was starting to feel chillier by the second.

This had turned into quite the mess. There was no denying that the book that was stolen at the market place had showed up for sale at our shop the next day. If Inoue continued to doggedly insist that Shioriko had stolen it, the police would likely lend him an ear. Rumors would also probably start circulating about this incident, and that would impact the shop’s reputation. It hadn’t even been six months since the Tanaka Toshio incident.

That being said, there was no way we’d be able to find the criminal that quickly. We were truly between a rock and a hard place.

“...Daisuke.”

Shioriko had let go of my arm and was looking up at my face. Her eyes were wet and she looked like she was about to burst into tears. Was Hitori really that frightening...no, I was probably the one that hurt her feelings. I shouldn’t have said that she would have stolen all of the books if she were really the criminal.

“Um...about what I said earlier...”

“If it’s alright with you, would you come drink with me this evening?”

“Huh?”

I couldn't believe my ears.

After closing the store for the day, we got on the Yokosuka line and headed over to Ofuna.

I had considered taking her to a more fashionable place, but Shioriko unexpectedly requested to go to the bar that I frequented near the station. We went down the station stairs and to a chain Japanese-style bar. A bar employee loudly welcome us the moment we walked through the automatic door.

There were fortunately not many customers in tonight. It was an atmosphere where we'd be able to drink in peace.

We moved over to a table for four on the far end of the room and sat across from each other. Shioriko handed me a drink menu, and when the server came to take our order, hesitantly asked if they had any Hakkaisan available. I hadn't expected her to start with Japanese sake right from the beginning.

"I didn't know you drank sake."

"Other types of alcohol are no good...I can't handle drinks very well."

I had never heard of someone being unable to drink anything but sake. She might not have realized it herself, but wouldn't that make her pretty strong with liquor? I ordered a beer for myself.

Even after we made a small toast, I still couldn't believe that we were drinking together like this. I would have never imagined this could happen until recently.

Shioriko looked down the entire time and talked even less that she usually did. I didn't know why she invited me out to drink, but there was something I wanted to tell her while she was still sober. I set down my mug. I still hadn't apologized for the mistake I made in the shop.

“About what happened before...”

“Umm...thank you very much for your help earlier.” She suddenly lifted her head and looked at me.

“Huh? Why are you thanking me?”

“When Hitori came by earlier, you said everything to him in my place...it was a great help. That’s why I’m treating you today.”

I was confused...it seemed she was seriously thanking me. She lifted her glass up from the masu and took a sip.

“I...need to apologize.”

“What do you mean?”

“For when I said that you would have taken all the rare books if you were really the criminal...”

“Oh, that.” She clapped her hands as if she just remembered. The edges of her eyes had started to become a little red.

“Please don’t worry about it. It’s true.”

The tables ahead of and behind us were now empty, and apart from the employees, Shioriko and I were the only people left in the bar. We talked in subdued voices just like we did in the shop, and the atmosphere didn’t feel bad.

Shioriko was more relaxed now that there was some alcohol in her system. She wasn’t the type to become more talkative as she drank, but her gestures and expressions did become grander. She was a cute drunk.

“It’s almost the new year, isn’t it?” she said said solemnly and looked up at the wall. There was an informational poster attached to the wall at the end of her line of sight. All you can drink for 3500 yen. For some reason there was a rabbit drawn on the festive poster.

“I wonder why they used a rabbit...”

“That’s the zodiac symbol for next year right?”

“Ah, I see.”

It certainly was going to be the year of the rabbit next year. I hadn’t thought of that.

“*Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.*” Shioriko smiled happily and said to herself in a singsong voice. She looked so pleased about her clever thought that it was mesmerizing.

Come to think of it, I also wanted to talk about *The Dandelion Girl*.

“Oh right, *The Dandelion Girl*...”

“You want to hear how the story continues after the protagonist separated from the girl?”

There was actually something more important we needed to discuss about the book, but now that she mentioned it, I also wanted to know how the story continued. It seemed I was fairly drunk myself.

“Please.”

“The protagonist’s vacation ended and he returned to his old life. However, he never forgot about the girl. He later came to learn that he was still connected to her—just not in the way he thought.”

Perhaps it was because of the alcohol, but her voice had a more relaxed tone than usual. That way of talking wasn’t bad for this kind of story.

“The girl was keeping a huge secret from the protagonist you see. It was a secret that she could not tell him no matter what, one that was powerful enough to destroy their relationship. The protagonist even doubted himself when he learned of the secret, thinking, *Why didn’t she tell me? Why couldn’t she be open with me after all this time?*” The story ends with the protagonist once again reunited with the girl.”

“Hmm...wait, didn’t you leave out the most important part?”

Shioriko nodded and suddenly reached into her bag on the seat next to her. She took out a copy of *The Dandelion Girl* wrapped in wax paper and handed it to me.

“I think it’s best if you read that part yourself. It’s a very short story...but if you find you can’t read it, I’ll tell you the story next time.”

“Were you planning on lending me this from the beginning?”

Shioriko nodded again. She must have really wanted me to read it. I silently accepted the book and put it in my inside jacket pocket so that I wouldn’t misplace it. I had to treat it with care; it was a memento of her father.

“My father must have had similar thoughts...”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, *‘why couldn’t you have told me, why couldn’t have you been more open with me...’* All the things he would have wanted to say to my mother.”

I subconsciously corrected my posture. Even under the influence of alcohol, it was surprising for Shioriko to initiate conversation about her mother.

“Did your mother also have a secret?”

“I have no doubt that she was hiding something from us...my father started reading this book over and over again after my mother disappeared. It was almost like he was searching for some sort of hint. He wasn’t someone who let his feelings show, and he became even more withdrawn after she left. Perhaps he was even more upset than we were...”

I found myself agreeing with her. It was surprisingly difficult to understand what even family members were thinking, especially if they were the type who didn’t express themselves often. I also went through a similar experience.

As if to put an end to the discussion, Shioriko picked up her glass,

filled to the brim with sake, and downed it in one gulp.

“Speaking of which, how are we going to find the culprit?”

I had originally planned to ask while the shop was still open, but I didn’t get the chance to because she’d stayed in the main house talking on the phone the entire time.

“Would it be better to consult with Takino after all?”

There was no reply.

“Shioriko?”

“Y...yes....?” She slurred out an answer with her head shaking unsteadily. She was already a little drunk, and draining the glass just seemed to have made her dizzy.

“Do you want me to order water?”

“No...It’s fine.” Shioriko hiccuped. She didn’t look fine to me.

“About *The Dandelion Girl*, it’s fine.”

Oh, she was talking about the case. But that didn’t look like it was fine either. Her pronunciation was becoming even more incomprehensible.

“I...already know who the culprit is this time.”

“Eh?” I instantly sobered up.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m serious...there are a few things I don’t understand though...
hic.”

I really needed to get her some water. Just when I started to look for an employee, Shioriko put both her hands on the table and fell forward. She was looking right at my face, but the tips of her hair had fallen into the fried tofu bowl. I nonchalantly moved the bowl out of the way.

“The culprit should show up at the store tomorrow...I’ve already made all the arrangements. Daisuke, please make absolutely certain

to be there.”

“Of course. I’ll come into work either way.”

Shioriko smiled limply. I couldn’t help but worry if she had really solved the mystery.

Takino showed up at Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia in the afternoon the next day. He walked up to the counter with his hands in the pockets of his duffel coat.

“This place is as cold as always, huh.” Rather than greet me, he commented on the temperature.

“It’s because of the wind coming through the cracks...what brings you here today?”

“Shinokawa called me yesterday. She said she had something important to discuss about *The Dandelion Girl* case. Do you know where she is?”

“She’s on lunch break right now.”

Shioriko hadn’t seemed different at all this morning; it was almost like all the alcohol from last night had no effect on her. Going by how confident her declaration last night sounded, I supposed she was still expecting the culprit to come to the store.

Hm?

I stared at Takino’s face. What if maybe he was...no, that would be ridiculous. I was overthinking this.

“I can go get her if you want.”

The door to the main house opened and Shioriko returned just as I got up and turned around.

“Ah, Renjou...thank you for taking the time to come here.” She lowered her head.

“I took the day off from working in the store today so it’s no big

deal...what was the important thing you wanted to talk about?”

“I now have a rough understanding of what happened with *The Dandelion Girl*...but I was wondering if I could ask you to relay everything to Hitori Books afterwards.”

So that’s what it was. By all rights it would be faster to have the victim, Inoue, present, but Shioriko wasn’t comfortable with him. That’s why she wanted Takino to act as an intermediary.

“Do you really know who did it?”

“Yes...”

“I see...alright. I’ll pass it along to Inoue then.” Takino nodded and Shioriko lightly cleared her throat.

There was no way Takino could be the culprit if she was asking him to act as a go-between. Who on earth could it be?

“When I first heard about incident, I thought it was strange. Why was *The Dandelion Girl* the only book that was stolen?”

“Maybe because it was valuable?” I replied.

“There were many more valuable books in that lot. Despite that, the culprit ignored all of them and took only *The Dandelion Girl*. That’s what made me think it might have been someone who only wanted that specific book in the first place. From there, I hypothesized about who it could be.”

“Are you saying someone in the association could have done it?” Takino asked.

Shioriko shook her head. “It doesn’t necessarily have to be someone in the association.”

“Hm? So an outsider, then?”

“I’ll explain my reasoning after, but yes, that is what I believe. The person who stole *The Dandelion Girl* was someone unaffiliated with the association.”

“Wait a second, outsiders aren’t even allowed into the convention hall, and anyone who does enter has to wear a nameplate. Surely someone would have noticed if there was some stranger hanging around. We all know each other’s faces and what store everyone belongs to.”

“That doesn’t mean there are no blind spots. There was at least one shop employee whose name and face were not known. I believe the criminal impersonated that person.”

“And who would that be?” I asked.

Shioriko stared at my face. We looked at each other for a full ten seconds before I finally realized what she meant.

“You mean...they impersonated me?”

“Correct. They took one of our nameplates and snuck in with that. They could easily claim to work at Biblia to avoid suspicion if anyone tried to stop them...it doesn’t seem like anyone actually did, however.”

“Still, there would have been at least some people who’d remember him, right?” Takino was still doubtful.

“Right, and there were. Daisuke, do you remember when you met Hitori near the entrance of the convention hall?”

Rather than calling it a meeting, it was more like I was completely ignored—no, he did say one thing to me.

“You mean when I tried to put on the nameplate with the missing pin and he told me it was broken...?”

“Exactly. I thought it was strange when that happened. Why did Hitori know that one of our nameplates was broken? Not even I knew that as the store owner.”

Now that she mentioned it, all the nameplates were neatly lined up on the shelf. He shouldn’t have had the chance to flip over all of the other stores’ nameplates.

“That man often hangs around the smoking area. Perhaps he happened to catch sight of someone going into the building and looking confused after picking up one of our nameplates.”

“But why wouldn’t he have stopped them if they were going into the building empty handed?” Takino crossed his arms.

“Because there’s no way to tell if someone is an association member until they put on a nameplate right?”

“What if I told you they weren’t empty handed?”

“Huh?”

“I believe the books that Biblia allegedly put up for sale at the marketplace...were brought in by that person.” Shioriko continued.

“If they pretended to be working at an affiliated store bringing books to the market, they would have had a much easier time entering the convention hall without standing out.

“Let’s think about it in chronological order. Renjou brought the books to sell at the market on Saturday. On Sunday, Hitori put in his bid. Shortly after, the culprit infiltrated the convention with his own set of books. After registering the books for sale under Biblia’s name, they stole *The Dandelion Girl*. There were comparatively fewer people there that day, so they certainly had the opportunity to do it.”

That made sense to me. Inoue put in his bids after he put his own books up for sale. There wouldn’t be anything strange about someone wandering around the convention hall.

“Wait. Assuming this is true, how did this person learn how to fill out the registration form then? Just who are they, really?” said Takino.

Shioriko turned to look at me.

“Daisuke, could you bring out the hardcover books we were left with from under the desk? Just the ones closest to you are fine.”

“Ah, of course.”

I poked my head under the desk and pulled out just one of the bundles. I put them all face up on the floor so that the other two could see the covers clearly.

“There’s a high chance that the criminal already owned the books they put up for sale. If you look carefully, you’ll see that there are quite a few books related to the antiquarian book trade among them. There’s Akayami Masami’s *The Art of Antiquarian Books*, Iwao Junichirou’s *Registry of out of Print Books*, and Shida Saburou’s *Introduction to Used Books in Your Town...*”

“Couldn’t it be that he’s just an antiquarian book maniac?” That would make sense for someone who would steal an out of print book.

But it seemed Shioriko was trying to point out something else.

“Please take a good look at this.” She pointed to the cover of *Introduction to Used Books in Your Town*.

It was a bit faded, but I could make out the subtitle if I looked carefully. ***A Must Read Guide for Buying, Selling, and Doing Business.***

“Maybe they worked at a secondhand bookstore.”

“That possibility does exist since this book is known as a business manual in the industry. Renjou, do you know of it?”

“Yeah, I read it a really long time ago. It’s a bit outdated now, but I think it’s a good book”

“If we also consider that they knew a lot about the system used at the convention, then we can conclude that the culprit may have worked at a bookstore affiliated with the Kanagawa vintage books association at one point. Judging by the publication date and how faded the book is, it would have been about ten years ago.”

“You...you can do the same thing your mother used to...”

Shioriko’s expression clouded at Takino’s awestruck comment.

Being able to tell an owner's characteristics by looking at the books they owned was said to be Shinokawa Chieko's special ability.

"No, I'm not that..."

Takino must have realized that bringing up her mother was a mistake. He continued talking to smooth over the uncomfortable silence.

"Everything you said so far makes sense, but it's still just a theory. Just because we know it was some outsider doesn't mean we're any closer to knowing who the culprit is exactly."

I had the same opinion. Going by her logic, the pool of suspects had grown even wider.

"That's how it seems right now...but let me continue. When the culprit entered the convention hall, there were a few things they absolutely had to have known." Shioriko said that and lifted one finger.

"The first was that Biblia would not be attending the convention that day. The culprit would need to bring in their books, register them for sale, find the book they were looking for, and steal it. Doing all that would take quite a lot of time. If a real Biblia employee showed up halfway, everything would fall apart.

"The second was that they knew we had an employee who had never been to the marketplace. If you combine both of those points with the fact that the criminal was obsessed with *The Dandelion Girl*, only one person comes to mind."

I thought about it for a bit, but couldn't think of anyone.

"...meaning someone like that exists?" I asked her. "We decided not to bring anything to the market on Sunday morning, right? There shouldn't be anyone besides us who could have known that."

"No, there is one more person."

"But we were the only ones here in the..." I went silent. Was that

really true?

As I was tracing back my memories, the glass door suddenly opened and a man walked into the shop. It was the customer in the down jacket who had purchased two paperbacks before. It might have been just the harsh cold, but he seemed pale.

“Good afternoon.”

I suddenly realized it when I greeted the customer. That was right—**this man was also in the shop that day.**

“Sure enough, he’s here.” Shioriko turned to the customer and began speaking.

“The person who stole *The Dandelion Girl* from the used books exchange convention...it’s you, isn’t it?”

—

The man took a paper bag out of the pocket of his down jacket and set it on the table. I opened the bag and took out *The Dandelion Girl*, wrapped in wax paper.

“I’m very sorry.” He deeply bowed his head and apologized with a voice that didn’t quite suit his large body. Our ages were different but his build did resemble mine.

“Did you ask him to come?” Takino asked Shioriko.

“Yes. Remember when I asked you to give me the contact information for the person who sold you the out of print books on the phone yesterday? I called and left them a message—please bring *The Dandelion Girl* to Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.”

“Huh? But the person who sold it to me was a woman.”

“And this man is that woman’s ex-husband...am I wrong?”

Come to think of it, Takino did say that she had gotten a divorce and was getting rid of the books since she was moving out... meaning that the ex-husband was the one who remained in their old home.

“How did you know that I was her husband...?” The man raised his head and asked. “I’ve been coming to this shop for a long time, but don’t think I’ve ever spoken to you.”

“I only learned about it recently myself. I realized when I saw the books that you brought to the convention.”

Shioriko crouched down and indicated towards the farthest book among the ones lined up on the floor. It was right next to *The Art of Antiquarian Books* and was titled *Guide to Engagement Gifts and Marriage Customs*. It was certainly a book that only someone getting married would have purchased.

“Which used bookstore did you work at before?”

The man’s shoulders shook. Perhaps he saw that there was no longer any point in hiding things. He cast his eyes down like he was making a confession.

“I started working at an old bookstore in Ofuna right after I graduated from high school. They mostly focused on manga and paperbacks, but occasionally dealt with out of production CDs and videos as well.”

“I’ve been there before...”

“Ah, I know it. It was on the first floor in the building along the Kashio River. It went out of business about three years ago I think.”

Shioriko and Takino reacted immediately. I was the only one who did not know it even though it was in my hometown.

“That shop was also where I met my wife. She worked part time there and also really liked books. Both of us collected lots of mystery and science fiction novels, and through the course of exchanging books, we naturally ended up dating. Our married life also went well for some years.”

The man spoke with a faraway look in his eyes. It seemed to be a relationship that started from having interests in common.

“Things started becoming strained after the bookstore shut down. The two of us had different qualifications and started working at different jobs. I continued collecting books as always, but she lost interest. As the number of books I had increased, little by little, so did our arguments. The books probably weren’t the only thing causing them, but sometimes I wondered...what if the shop hadn’t gone out of business like that?”

The man sighed once and turned towards Shioriko.

“How did you know where I used to work?”

“I got the feeling that you might have had experience working in a bookstore or library when you were here the other day.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you asked, ‘are there any plans to replenish stock after this’. There aren’t many people outside of the industry who would have phrased it like that.”

“Ah...” The man let out in a low voice.

Come to think of it, I didn’t know that phrase until I started working at the store either. I guess that was to be expected though, since I had never worked in a bookstore before then.

“That’s when I also figured out that you had a fixation on ***The Dandelion Girl***. If we had the Cobalt version of the book, you likely would have bought that too.”

“You had it all figured out back then it seems...” The man seemed to have understood her explanation. I still didn’t get it, so Shioriko began to explain.

“The two books he bought that day were ***Annual SF Masterpieces 2***, published by Sogen Mystery Bunko, and ***Strange Tales***, published by Bunshun Bunko. Both of them contain Robert F. Young’s ***The Dandelion Girl***. I do not think that was just a coincidence.”

“You mean the story can be found in other books?”

“Yes, but they’re all out of print. The Cobalt version, which has the title of the book on its cover, is the rarest of them all.”

I finally understood why she put up her own copy of the book for sale. She did it with the expectation that this customer would buy it the next time he came to the shop. It wasn’t just a coincidence after all.

“This book belonged to my wife...but it was my favorite.” The man had a lonely smile as he looked at it.

“When I found out that this was one of the books that my wife sold, I was completely blindsided by that...why couldn’t she have just given it to me instead of selling it? I called the store that she sold it to in a panic. I said I wanted to buy it at any cost, but was told that it had just been taken to the market.”

“Ah—that was my mother, I bet.” Takino scratched his head. “I usually ask her to watch the shop when I go to the market.”

“At first, I wanted to give up since there was nothing else I could do. I came here thinking I’d be able to buy myself another copy. I thought it would surely be in stock at Biblia...but in the end, I couldn’t find it here either.”

Something suddenly occurred to me and I opened the copy of *The Dandelion Girl* that the man brought in. On an old label attached to the last page was the name of the shop, Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. This book had originally been purchased here.

“I ended up buying other books that had the story printed in them, but reading those didn’t bring me any satisfaction. The one book I really needed was the one that my wife had...nothing else would work. That’s when I remembered the conversation I heard between you two in this shop. Maybe I’d be able to take the book back if I skillfully sneaked into the marketplace.”

“You say take the book back, but it wasn’t even yours to begin with.” Takino commented with an amazed expression. “Why would you go so far for a book that originally belonged to your wife?”

“I gave this book to my wife when we first got married. Along with a ring.”

No one said anything for a while.

I finally understood the reason why he so easily came to the store to return the book he'd gone to such great lengths to steal. He must not have found great satisfaction in taking back the book that was a memento of his marriage. What this man had wanted to take back was probably more than just the book.

“I bought *The Dandelion Girl* from Biblia ten years ago...your mother was the one who recommended it to me.”

“Eh?” Shioriko's eyes went wide. “Was it really my mother that recommended it, not my father?”

“Yes, I told her that I was looking for a book for my fiancée and she told me *The Dandelion Girl* would be good. She told me she also gave this book to her husband when she got married.”

I remembered what Shioriko told me at the bar last night. After his wife left, her father read the book he received from her when they got married over and over again. I didn't think he would do something like that because he was angry at her. He must have been reading it because he yearned for the times when she was still around.

“But our story wasn't nearly as happy in the end...”

The man who had come in to return the book muttered softly.

It didn't even take me a single night to finish reading *The Dandelion Girl*. There were a few times I felt dizzy reading it, but ultimately I was glad I did. It was no surprise to me that a mother and daughter had unknowingly both recommended the same book to two different people.

Shioriko had said nothing at all about *The Dandelion Girl* since the

day the culprit visited. She was clearly giving off signals that she wanted to avoid the subject. She must have had complicated feelings now that she knew it was a book her mother had originally given to her father.

It had first passed from her mother to her father, and then from her father to his daughter. Now I was in possession of it. It didn't seem like she was going to ask for it back for the time being, so I was going to have to keep holding on to it for a while.

In any event, he got the definite impression that she had somehow stepped out of the past and into the present...

For some reason, I couldn't get that line from of the book's opening lines out of my head. It wouldn't be strange, for example, for someone to get that impression if they met a girl whose appearance strikingly resembled her mother's, many years ago. If they were both just beautiful, it might evoke a nostalgic feeling and nothing else. But if the mother was someone to be terrified of, then perhaps the daughter would also evoke that feeling of terror.

—

I paid a visit to Hitori Bookstore the next evening. The building vaguely resembled Biblia and was situated right next to a local library. There were no other customers in the shop when I entered. The white-haired shop owner, putting a paperback into the shelf, glanced at me.

“What're you here for?”

The Dandelion Girl was displayed on the shelf so that the cover could be seen.

“Is that the book from before?”

Inoue did not reply. Takino had taken the culprit to the police station yesterday, and the stolen book was returned to this store. He later told me that since the man returned the stolen item of his own accord and deeply regretted his actions, he would likely get away

with only light punishment.

“I’d rather not chat with you here. If you don’t need anything from me, get out.”

“Could you return the book that you took from our shop?”

The case this time involved three different copies of *The Dandelion Girl*. The first one was the copy that was originally purchased at Biblia, then sold to Takino Books, and had finally found its way here. The second was the one Shioriko got from her father, which was now in my possession. The third was the one that Shioriko bought for herself, and that was the one Inoue took from our shop.

Inoue walked past me and went behind the counter near the door. The cash register in this store was right next to the entrance.

“Here, take it.”

He handed over the book, which was wrapped in wax paper. He didn’t apologize for suspecting Shioriko.

“...by the way, where did you learn my name?”

I asked him while accepting the book and Inoue froze. I still hadn’t figured out the answer to that question. There weren’t any other customers in the store, but Inoue still looked around before leaning closer to me.

“Have you ever met Shinokawa Chieko?”

“No, never.”

“You’ve never talked to her over the phone or sent her any mail either?”

“Right.” I was confused, but nodded my head. “I thought no one knew where she was. She hasn’t even contacted her family for the past ten years...”

“Hah.” Inoue snorted as if that were ridiculous. “Do you really believe that story?”

“...what do you mean?”

“That girl you work for, she’s always been in touch with her mother. The fact that she hasn’t heard from her is just an act.”

“Huh? No way that’s true. It’s impossible.” I decisively denied it. I didn’t know what happened between him and Shinokawa Chieko in the past, but this was bordering on delusion. I had been by Shioriko’s side long enough to know for sure if her words and actions were all an act.

“You think?” Inoue reached under the counter, pulled out a small white card, and handed it to me.

“Read this.”

It didn’t look like he was going to offer an explanation, so I took a look at the card he gave me. It was a Christmas card made of thick Japanese paper folded in two. I flipped the card over and looked at the sender’s name.

Chieko Shinokawa.

“I don’t like that woman, but we are more or less old acquaintances. I get letters like this from her every once in a while.”

“But not even...her family...”

“That’s why I’m saying you’re being lied to. Read the rest.”

I hesitantly opened the card. There was a faded image of a church like building printed on it. On the bottom half of the card was a short message written in blue ink. It was frightening how similar it was to Shioriko’s handwriting.

To Inoue Taichirou,

It must be cold over there.

Please stop scaring my daughter every time you see her.

Same goes for Goura Daisuke who’s working

there now.

He seems like a good kid, so try to get along with him.

I heard he couldn't read books though.

A shiver ran down my spine. How did she know my name—no, anyone could find that out with a little research. More importantly, *how did she know about my condition?* That wasn't something I told just anyone. The only people who knew were my family and relatives, longtime friends—and Shioriko.

There's no way.

This was supposed to be completely impossible.

"It's best for you to keep your guard up around that mother and daughter." Inoue whispered in a low voice as if he were afraid of someone overhearing.

"You're done for if they ever latch on to your weakness. That's my warning to you."

CHAPTER 2

A CHILDREN'S BOOK WITH A TANUKI, A CROCODILE, AND A DOG?

It was the fourth of January, and the novel feeling that accompanied the start of a new year was beginning to fade.

The people I now saw waiting at Kamakura station weren't travelers returning from the first shrine visit of the year, but locals going out to shop. Nursing a hangover from last night, I also waited for the next train to arrive.

I had met up with some of my high school classmates for the first time in a while yesterday afternoon. Lots of came back home for the new year, so these meetups ended up being something between a New Year's party and a class reunion. Sawamoto, who currently lived in Koshigoe, was there, but my ex-girlfriend Kousaka Akiho was not.

It was with a strange feeling of both relief and worry that I went to visit the Tsurugaoka Hachimangū shrine with everyone after hearing from Sawamoto that Akiho was apparently hard back at work since yesterday.

I stood for a while near the shrine entrance in front of the stump where the large ginkgo tree used to stand. I had known that the huge, several hundred year old tree fell in a typhoon last spring, but it was my first time seeing it in person. I didn't have any particular feelings about the tree, but its abrupt disappearance was still an unexpected shock.

Oh well. It's not like there was some moral lesson to be learned here.

The entire group was invited to stay over at a house in Zaimokuza after a long night of drinking at the bar. My memory started getting

hazy at around midnight, but I did remember everyone getting all excited talking about Biblia.

They were saying stuff about how the stupid Goura was currently getting along with the beautiful bookshop owner and jokes that I should hurry up and get rejected if there wasn't going to be any progress so they could laugh at me. I somehow managed to avoid talking about it for the most part and left the house after a late breakfast banquet, which was just a short time ago.

A blue train with cream colored lines pulled into the station. I waited for the previous passengers to disembark before boarding myself.

While there were some free seats, Ofuna was only two stops away so there really wasn't much point in sitting down. I held on to the strap and aimlessly stared out of the window.

“Oh my, hey—hey! Goura!” A familiar high pitched voice rang out just as the train began to move.

I looked around, wondering who called my name.

“Where are you looking? I'm right here! Over here!”

My eyes turned to a small lady sitting in the seat in front of me. She wore a down jacket and had a fur scarf wrapped around her neck.

“Happy New Year...Shinobu.” I let go of the strap and bowed my head.

This was Sakaguchi Shinobu. She lived with her older husband in Zushi.

Almost half a year ago she came to the store to take back the copy of *Introduction to Logic* that her husband was trying to sell. She continued to stop by the shop from time to time even after the incident had been resolved,. It wasn't, of course, because Shinobu wanted to buy or sell books; she just dropped in to chat. The last time she came in, she brought us assorted dried fruits as a

souvenir from Taiwan.

“Happy New Year to you too! Let’s get along this year too! Let’s get along!” She said as she grabbed my hand and violently shook it up and down.

“What a coincidence seeing you here! I was just about to go to Kita-Kamakura to visit the shop. Are you working today?”

“Unfortunately not. I’m off.”

I had worked up until the last day of the year, and got the first four days of January off. There weren’t many stores that were closed on the first and last days of the year, but Biblia’s schedule had always been this way.

“Ehh! Really?” She raised her voice. Shouldn’t she have expected this, considering one of the only two shop employees there was wandering around like this?

“Is the shop owner there?”

Raising my head, I thought back. I hadn’t talked to Shioriko about anything but work lately.

“Hmm...let’s see... Oh, I don’t think she’s there right now. I believe she had an arrangement with someone today.”

I happened to see her mark her January calendar with “Ryuu – 12pm” while talking on the phone on New Year’s Eve. Shioriko probably had plans to meet with Takino Renjou’s younger sister, who she’d gotten along with since her school days. She did say something about the two of them having a New Year’s party.

“Did something happen?”

If Shinobu was trying to visit even though the shop was closed, it had to be something serious. Maybe it was something related to her husband, Sakaguchi Masashi. Their relationship was almost sickeningly sweet, but Sakaguchi had a past he didn’t like to talk about and also suffered from a severe eye disease.

“Yeah...kind of.” Shinobu put her hand on her cheek in thought. “There’s something that’s been really bothering me, and I wanted to ask the shop owner for advice. But if she’s not there, I’ll just have to go another day.”

The train decelerated as it pulled into Kita-Kamakura station, but Shinobu showed no sign of getting up. It didn’t look like she wanted to switch trains here.

“Do you have work after this?” I asked.

I remembered that she worked at her friend’s snack bar. It was possible that her job was in Fujisawa, but it still seemed too early for her to be going to work.

“No, I’m off today but...” Shinobu stopped talking and looked up at me. The train had stopped at Kita-Kamakura station. The train doors opened and then closed again, but she did her eyes off my face.

“What is it?”

“Goura, do you have some time today?”

“Eh? Yeah, I’m free.”

“In that case, would it be alright if I discussed it with you first? I wanted to talk about a book.”

“A book...is it *Introduction to Logic*?”

“No, not that.” She shook her head.

“This time it’s about a book that I used to own a long time ago.”

Continuing the conversation on the train wouldn’t work, so we got off at the next stop, Ofuna station. It felt kind of strange walking around with a regular customer away from the store.

“I have no problem listening, but I don’t know how helpful my advice will be. My book knowledge isn’t exactly great...” I turned and talked to Shinobu as we went up the escalator.

She leaned on the escalator handrail as we went up. “But you know more than me right? I want to talk to anyone who could have a clue. There aren’t any other people I can ask for help with this.”

Shinobu narrowed her eyes, and her thick mascara made a distinctive line with her eyelids. I supposed I could at least listen to what she had to say and pass it on to Shioriko tomorrow.

I noticed another of our regulars after we got off the escalator and passed through the ticket gate. A girl wearing a long, hooded coat, with a sharp expression on her face, was leaning against a pillar. She stared wearily at the station building entrance with her hands in her pockets. It looked like she was waiting for someone.

“Kosuga.”

I called her name, and Kosuga Nao turned my way, eyes wide.

“Goura, why are you...oh right, you live in Ofuna...Happy New Year.” She lowered her head slightly, adding the New Year’s greeting at the end as if she just remembered.

“Happy New Year,” I responded to her greeting. Shinobu, who was next to me, looked at Nao with interest.

“This girl is also one of the shop’s regulars.”

There was an incident with her involving a Kotama Kiyoshi book in the past, but Nao still often stopped by the shop since then. She got along well with the homeless book hunter, Shida.

“Ah, is that so? Nice to meet you! My name’s Sakaguchi Shinobu. Sakaguchi is spelled with the characters for *slope* and *mouth*. My first name is spelled the same way it sounds. I also cause a lot of trouble for this shop. I hope we get along!” Shinobu enthusiastically held her hand out for a handshake.

Perhaps taken aback by her high energy, Nao hesitantly took her hand after a moment.

“I hope so too. I’m Kosuga Nao.”

“Are you waiting for someone?” I asked.

“Yeah...well actually, she’s already here, but she said she wanted to go to the restroom...”

“Yoo—sorry for taking so long! The wait for the toilet was so long back there at Lumine... Oh, it’s Goura. Why’re you here?”

A familiar voice suddenly cut into our conversation, and a girl wearing a red duffel coat with her hair tied into a ponytail approached us. This was Shioriko’s younger sister, Shinokawa Ayaka.

“I just happened to pass by...were the two of you meeting up?”

“Yep.” Ayaka nodded as if it were only natural.

I on the other hand was surprised at the unexpected combination. I knew that they went to the same school and had been talking a lot lately, but I didn’t think they were so close that they would hang out on their off days.

I turned to Sakaguchi Shinobu. Since she was a regular customer, it would probably be a good idea to introduce her to Ayaka.

“This person is...” Just when I started, the two of them suddenly ran up to each other and vigorously shook both hands.

“Ayaka! Hello! Please take care of me this year too!”

“Shinobu! It’s been so long! Take care of me as well! How have you been?”

Their greetings were loud enough to attract the attention of the people around us. I was taken aback.

“You two know each other?”

“Shinobu stopped by once when you and the shop owner were away from the shop...”

“...and we exchanged contact info and went out for tea.” Shinobu took over Ayaka’s explanation.

I didn't know about any of this, but it was clear that they already has a good relationship.

“Shinobu, did you get shorter?”

“Nope! I haven't been wearing boots or high heels these days. I got these shoes instead! They're really easy to walk in!”

Shinobu lifted the hem of her dress and showed off her plain colored sneakers. Ayaka's eyes glittered with excitement.

“Wow, they're the same as mine!”

Ayaka lifted her leg to show off her own shoes. The design really was the same.

“Look at that! They match!

“Yeah, they really do! Woah!”

Kosuga and I watched from a distance as they passionately discussed how nice their shoes were. To be honest, it was hard to deal with this high level of excitement.

Well still, this is pretty incredible.

Whether it was with Kosuga Nao or Sakaguchi Shinobu, Shinokawa Ayaka's people skills were uncommonly good if she could get along with people so well after such a short amount of time. She was the complete opposite of Shioriko. It was almost like Ayaka had taken off with all of her sister's communication skills.

Kosuga Nao's lips were pressed together. She seemed impatient.

“So where are you going?” I asked.

“We're going to see a movie.”

“Yep, yep. Nao said she wanted me to watch this cartoon and let me borrow a DVD. The series has a new movie out now, and she said she wanted to see it no matter what...”

“Stop saying so much, you idiot!” Nao interrupted Ayaka in a fluster and purposefully cleared her throat.

“Anyway, we need to go. There’s not much time left.”

Nao took a passcase from her pocket and tapped the automatic ticket gate sensors with it before passing into the station. Movies that aired at the beginning and end of the year were usually aimed at kids.

“She has a cute passcase, doesn’t she?” Shinobu whispered to me in a low voice.

I noticed it too. Nao’s passcase had a brown monkey-like character with large ears drawn on it. I didn’t know its name, but I’d seen it around a lot lately. Some people had pretty unexpected tastes.

“...Goura.” Ayaka made no move to follow Kosuga. Her expression was now suddenly serious.

“Did something happen recently? Have you not been feeling well or something?”

“Eh? Why?”

“Shioriko has been worried about you lately, Goura. Since you haven’t been as enthusiastic these days...she’s worried that something happened, you know.”

There was nothing wrong with my health of course, but what I heard from Inoue at Hitori Books at the end of the year had left a lasting impact on me.

I didn’t completely believe that Shioriko had been in contact with her mother this whole time, but there was no doubt that someone was giving Shinokawa Chieko information about me. It was a bad feeling, like someone was spying on me. There was no point in thinking about who I should have, and shouldn’t have trusted now.

I hadn’t though Shioriko would notice though. I did get an email from her in January, but the contents were the usual formal New Year’s salutations. I also sent her a similar letter in return, but thinking about it now, that was probably a bit unnatural.

“I’m doing just fine...”

“I see...Well, I guess it’s alright then.” It seemed that was all she’d wanted to ask.

“If that’s all it is, then Shioriko should feel better. Anyway, see ya! You too Shinobu!”

Ayaka broke into a small run and waved as she passed through the ticket gate.

Shinobu and I went into a tea shop on the second floor of a pachinko parlor. More than half the tables were filled, so we chose a seat in the non-smoking section near the wall.

“Are you alright in the non-smoking section?”

“I quit smoking... It’s better that way they say.” Shinobu replied as she took off her coat.

Come to think of it, there had been news a few months ago that of a steep increase in cigarette prices. Apparently, many people quit smoking because of it.

We ordered drinks for ourselves, but neither of us continued the conversation. Perhaps because there were so many elderly customers visiting alone, the tea shop was a lot quieter than I thought it would be.

“Are you getting along with the shop owner?”

“Ehh?”

“Goura, you like her, don’t you?” Shinobu spoke softly.

I didn’t feel the need to hide it now that she asked me so bluntly. I also felt comfortable talking to an older acquaintance who knew both Shioriko and me.

“Yeah...I don’t know what she thinks about it though.”

“That girl gives off a difficult to approach feeling for some reason

—it's like she isn't willing to open up her heart. She's kind of like my Masa in that way...though comparing her to an old man like that would be rude.”

“Not at all...”

Masa was her nickname for her husband, Sakaguchi Masashi. He and Shioriko certainly did have common traits, though their ages and gender were completely different.

“People like that tend to look straightforwardly at the people they're interested in and, unexpectedly, are able to understand a lot. That makes it quite hard to hide things...”

She was talking to herself, but I thought she might be referring to the conversation I had with Ayaka. It was her sort of roundabout way of telling me to just be honest if there was something on my mind.

“You're right.”

There was no use mulling over it. If I was making absolutely no progress thinking about what Inoue from Hitori Bookstore had told me, then there was no choice but to ask Shioriko herself about it.

The drinks we ordered arrived at the table and the conversation was paused for a moment. I got coffee and Shinobu got hot milk.

“How is Masashi doing?”

“He's doing great now, wonderful.” Shinobu grinned.

“Masashi's eyes aren't getting any better, but other than that, he's as healthy as can be. He's training now so that he'll be alright even as his eyesight gets worse. He's working so hard to take care of his daily needs, I think that serious part of him is wonderful...”

Shinobu had a faraway look in her eyes as she held her teacup. I hadn't expected her to start playing up her husband's virtues all of a sudden.

“Right, so about the book from before...”

“Eh? Ah, of course.”

She changed the topic, and I had a little trouble keeping up. Come to think of it, this was what we came here to talk about today.

“There was a really interesting book that I used to read a lot back when I was starting elementary school. I didn’t like reading at all and I don’t really remember what the story was about. All I remember is that it was really good. It’s been on my mind so much these days that I couldn’t stand it anymore. Have you ever felt like that?”

“Yeah, sometimes.” I nodded.

It wasn’t books, but there were times when I felt an intense longing for things that I enjoyed as a child.

“I want to find that book again no matter what, and that’s why I want to ask you and the shop owner for help. Of course, I’ll pay if you find it.”

“You won’t need to do that.”

This was essentially just a request for us to find a book. It wasn’t a rare request for an antiquarian book store. I didn’t know if we would have it in stock, but we should at least be able to find a shop that did sell it.

“What’s the title of the book?”

“That’s the thing...I can’t remember it.” Shinobu said with a troubled expression.

“Huh?”

“The title had katakana in it....but I’ve always been bad with foreign names. That’s also why I’m also no good with English.”

“Do you at least know the author’s name?”

“Well, it was a foreigner. I think it was a long name, too.”

“I’m guessing you don’t know the publisher either.”

Shinobu nodded. I took a sip of coffee as I gathered my thoughts. There wasn't anything I could go off of so far.

“...It's impossible, isn't it?”

At any rate, it was impossible for me. Of course I wanted help, but even Shioriko probably wouldn't be able to do anything with only this much information.

“You said you read it as a child...was it a children's book?”

“I think so, yes. There were lots of illustrations, but there were lots of chapters too. And there wasn't just hiragana, there was kanji with furigana too.

“What kind of story was it?”

“Let's see...I believe it was kind of a picture book with a tanuki, dog, and a crocodile. I don't know what year it was set in, but I think it took place somewhere in the West....”

That's where her explanation paused. It seemed even her memories of what the story was about were vague.

“Can you remember anything else?”

“There was a dog!” Sakaguchi Shinobu suddenly exclaimed. Didn't she just tell me this?

“It was a really sad story...the dog was loved by the owner in the house where he was born, but as soon as he became bigger, he was thrown out and replaced with another puppy. Isn't it horrible?”

It certainly was cruel. That would have been a pretty harsh story for a book made for children.

“...And then he became friends with a lonely lion.”

“That's quite a difference in size.”

“Right, right. The lion was also worried about his size at first, but he eventually got over it and they became friends. Isn't it great how they both got along despite being so different?”

I related this to the Sakaguchi couple. There was a difference in age, and their pasts were completely different.

“So were the dog and lion the main characters?”

“No, the protagonist was a tanuki.”

“A tanuki? In a foreign story?”

This was the first time I’d heard of a tanuki appearing in a children’s story from another country.

Shinobu didn’t seem completely confident either; she tilted her head in doubt.

“It might not have been called a tanuki exactly, but I clearly remember what it looked like! Give me just a moment.”

She took out a small notebook from her handbag and began scribbling on it with a ballpoint pen. She was more skilled than I expected and finished drawing an animal with short arms and legs. Its entire body was black, it had two ears above its head, only the area around its eyes were white, and it had a long puffy tail—

“That’s a tanuki isn’t it?”

“I know right, it really is! This tanuki met several characters, like the abandoned dog, and the lonely lion.”

“Did it do anything with them?”

Shinobu squeezed her eyes tightly shut and pressed her finger to her head as if she was trying to draw out a memory.

“The tanuki was I think...trying to build a house.”

“You mean like a dog house?”

“Mm—I think it was bigger than that. It was kind of like a house where lonely children could gather...they carried in lots of bricks on a large truck and everyone put their effort together to build it.”

“So a bunch of characters appeared.”

“Yep, yep yep. There was also a boy who was no good at studying

and was trying to make friends. He was looking for someone with worse grades than him, but couldn't find anyone."

"That's a pretty amazing...so humans also appeared in the story?"

"Of course they did. Not just people though. There was also a crocodile, and a giraffe...all the animals were living together happily. I think there was also something about a zoo in the story..."

It was interesting, but I didn't really understand what kind of world it was. It kind of felt like a Disney cartoon.

"That's all I can remember though. I don't know at all how the story ended."

The reason her memory was so fragmented was probably because she read the parts she liked over and over again. That was how children tended to read books.

I took the picture of the main character that she drew and put it in my pocket. I doubted this would work as a clue, but if I showed it to someone who was more knowledgeable about books then maybe—

"Ah." A thought flashed into my mind. I had forgotten something obvious.

"What is it? Do you know what book it was?" Sakaguchi Shinobu's eyes were sparkling.

"It's not that...you had this book at your house, right? Was it something your parents bought for you?"

For some reason, it felt like Shinobu's expression stiffened.

"Yeah, that's right...my mom bought it for me at the neighborhood bookstore but..."

"In that case, what about asking her?" I replied. It would be perfectly normal if the book their daughter read so eagerly as a child remained in their memories. "It might even still be at that house."

"Yes...well, that might be true but..." Shinobu's voice suddenly

became small. “I don’t really...want to talk to my parents.”

Crap. I had completely forgotten that she had a bad relationship with her parents. That was why she’d moved away from home the moment she graduated from high school.

“I’m sorry.”

I lowered my head, but she flashed her white teeth to smooth it over with a smile.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Because you’re right. I was planning to go back home to ask them anyway...ah, of course!” Shinobu abruptly clapped her hands, and a loud sound rang out in the shop. I had a bad feeling about why.

“What’s the matter?”

“Can you and the others come with me? To my home town!”

“Huh!?” I couldn’t stop myself from exclaiming.

“...And that’s where things are now.”

It was a quiet morning at Biblia and I had just finished giving Shioriko a detailed account of what happened yesterday. I waited for her reply.

She had her head tilted to the side earlier, but hadn’t moved it in a while, as if her neck was stiff. She didn’t seem to notice the long, black strands of hair covering the lenses of her glasses

“Do you know what book she could be talking about?”

There was no response. Shioriko was still thinking hard. After tens of seconds, she took a long, deep breath like a diver surfacing from the water.

“I’m sorry...it’s a bit difficult.” Her thin voice sounded regretful.

I didn’t think she had anything to apologize for though. In fact, it would have been more surprising if she figured it out given the only

clues we had to work with.

“But I do feel like I’ve heard this story before.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Yes, but...it’s a little strange. I rarely ever forget the titles and authors of the books I’ve read.”

“But isn’t it normal? Not to remember every book you read as a kid.”

“Oh, is that so?” was her puzzled reply.

Evidently common sense did not apply to Shioriko when it came to books.

“Were you able to find any clues?”

“It’s nothing substantive, but if Shinobu’s story is accurate, then we can at least narrow the scope a little.”

“What do you mean?”

“First, this book was sold new at bookstores in the latter half of 1970.” Shioriko lifted her index finger.

“It’s reasonable to assume that Shinobu read the book just as she was starting elementary school. Of course, the book would have been written and published before then.

“And the second point,” Shioriko raised her middle finger.

“The story was most likely written in the 20th century, and was set in a European or American city during that time period.”

“How do you know that?”

Shinobu said that she didn’t know when it was written, and she didn’t say anything at all about when and where the story was set.

“There was a scene where they carry a large amount of bricks in a truck, correct? Trucks were first invented in the late 19th century, but weren’t in widespread use until the early 20th century. The fact

that there was also a zoo in the story means that there's a high chance it was set in a city."

I nodded; that made sense. However, the range from early 1900s to 1970 was still far from specific. We had only narrowed our scope a little.

"What I don't understand is how the protagonist could be a tanuki." Shioriko put her fingers down.

"Tanuki have appeared in stories in Japan since long ago, but since they live principally in East Asia, they aren't well known in the West. Perhaps it was a different animal..."

"But the picture she drew looks like a tanuki, doesn't it?"

I looked down at the piece of paper set on the countertop. It was the drawing of the protagonist that Shinobu gave me yesterday.

"It really does..."

The two of us fell silent for a while. There were too few clues, and it felt like there wasn't much else we could work with.

"Do you want to go to Shinobu's home?"

Shinobu said something about how having people knowledgeable about books come with her would be more convenient, but she probably just didn't want to go back home by herself.

"I do." Shioriko replied immediately. "I also want to know what book this is."

I felt the same way. The idea of someone going back home with some bookstore employees in tow felt odd though.

"By the way, has she talked to her husband about this book?"

"Huh?"

"Shinobu didn't say anything about her husband's reaction, so I was a little curious..."

That did seem to be the case now that I thought about it. Even if

we went to Shinobu's hometown with her, Masashi was the type of person who'd want to come along as well. Maybe there were circumstances that stopped him from going with us this time. Shinobu said her parents were strict, so I didn't know if they would approve of the fact that she married an older man.

"But there isn't any reason to hide it either. What if Masashi also didn't know which book it was, and she didn't feel the need to bring it up in our conversation?"

Shinobu herself told me that she couldn't hide anything from her husband.

Shioriko smiled and nodded in agreement.

"I see...maybe I'm overthinking this. Anyway, let's get back to work; quite a few online orders came in yesterday..."

"Shioriko."

I called to stop her before she went back behind the wall of books. There was one more thing that I needed to talk about.

"The truth is, I went to Hitori Bookstore before."

I told her everything I knew—from the Christmas card that the shop owner, Inoue, received from Shinokawa Chieko to the suspicions that Inoue had shared with me.

Shioriko listened to my story silently with her expression almost completely still. I apologized at the end for keeping it a secret for so long, but she angrily looked away from me.

"I have most certainly not been in contact with my mother, and I haven't told anyone about you either. There is no meaning in pretending otherwise. I would have liked for you to tell me this sooner."

"I see...I'm sorry."

"I've been worried about you since the year began." Shioriko still wasn't looking at me.

“I was worried that something was wrong...do you remember when we went drinking? It was the day before *The Dandelion Girl* was returned.”

“Eh? Yeah, I remember.” I answered her question, confused. What was she bringing that up for now? For some reason, Shioriko’s cheeks were slightly red.

“I had fun that day...and drank more than I usually do, so I can’t really remember everything I said. I was thinking that by some chance, I ended up doing something strange...”

“Strange how?” I blurted out without thinking.

I really didn’t understand what she meant, but her face became even redder.

“I mean, um...like if I couldn’t stop laughing...or if I hummed to myself...or dozed off....”

Her voice gradually became softer and softer. As brilliant as she was, she got the wrong impressions at the strangest times. It was hard to hold my laughter in.

“Nothing like that happened.”

“Really? You’re not just hiding it?” She glanced at me from the corner of her eye to see my expression. Honestly speaking, what I said wasn’t completely true, but it hadn’t been a bad way to drink. Rather, it was the complete opposite.

“It’s true.”

Having said that, a strange sense of courage welled up inside me.

“What about going drinking some other day? If you’re alright with it of course.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Just as I was feeling relieved that I hadn’t been outright rejected, I noticed that Shioriko’s expression had become dark.

“If what Inoue said is true, it would mean that there’s someone out there passing on information to my mother...”

“Right...”

If Shioriko wasn’t in contact with her mother, then it had to be someone else keeping in touch with her. *Someone around us was secretly collecting information about us and passing it on to Shinokawa Chieko.* There was no doubt that this person would also have information about her.

Who on earth could it be?

The feeling that I suddenly couldn’t trust the people around me made me feel all the more uneasy.

“Let’s get back to work, shall we?” Shioriko spoke up.

Just as I nodded to agree, the glass door opened with a loud noise. When I turned around to look, I saw an older man wearing sunglasses standing at the entrance. He wore a plain gray woolen coat and had a bright red knit scarf wrapped around his neck.

“Happy New Year, all.” Sakaguchi Masashi lowered his head and greeted us.

“I came to consult about my wife. Would you have the time to discuss it with me?” Masashi cut straight to the point as he took off his scarf.

Some parts of it were thin and other parts thick; it was obvious at a glance that the scarf was handmade.

“Of course...what can we help with?”

“I heard Shinobu was asking you about a book she read as a child. I would like you to give me an overview of what you discussed.”

As always, he had an interrogative way of speaking and didn’t add any superfluous information.

Shioriko and I exchanged glances for just a moment.

“It was a request for us to find the book, but she didn’t know the title or the name of the author. Shinobu said she wanted to go back home to ask her parents about it and asked if we could go along with her...”

I answered his question since I was the one who talked to Shinobu directly. The moment he heard that she was planning to go back home, Masashi’s expression became gloomy.

“I see, that’s how it was.” He muttered to himself in a low voice.

“Is something wrong?”

I was starting to feel uncomfortable. Was there a reason Shinobu didn’t want to tell her husband the full story this time? After a brief silence, Masashi suddenly opened his mouth.

“I believe her real goal isn’t to find the book she read as a child. It’s to go meet her parents.”

“Eh?”

“Did you know that Shinobu doesn’t have a good relationship with her parents?”

“Yes, somewhat.” I nodded.

“Her parents are both very diligent people. They’re retired now, but her father served at the Kanagawa prefectural office for a long time, and her mother managed a tutoring school. I know she also has siblings, but I haven’t met them in person.”

I remembered Shinobu telling me before that her parents were intelligent and passionate about education. Considering their occupations, I could agree with that assessment.

“Her mother was especially strict with her, and that led to constant arguments between them. Shinobu’s relationship with her parents seemed to have calmed down for a period after she moved out when she graduated high school...but that’s when our marriage became a big issue.

“Since her mother would absolutely not approve of us, Shinobu cut off ties with her and entered into my family registry. She hasn’t been back home for almost 20 years now.”

“Doe she still meet with her father and siblings?”

“She occasionally talks with them over the phone, but rarely ever meets them in person from what I understand. She often jokes about the thin bonds in her family.”

Masashi, who had been indifferently explaining up to this point, grimaced slightly. Despite what Shinobu said, he must have felt that it was his fault that her relationship with her family was so strained.

“Perhaps her feelings have changed after all these years. Shinobu won’t say it herself, but I think she’s been looking for the opportunity to reconcile with her parents. People tend to better understand their parents’ feelings the older they become.

“Last November, Shinobu and I got a message from her parents saying that they wanted the four of us to have a meal together. It felt like they had always been waiting for the right time to restore their relationship.”

“Did you go?”

Masashi nodded solemnly at my question.

“They even made a reservation at a well-known restaurant in Chinatown. It was their first reunion in a while, and we were able to have a peaceful meal. Shinobu and her parents were enjoying themselves talking about old times. I didn’t want to get in their way, so I didn’t join in and quietly ate.”

I could vividly imagine Masashi sitting rigidly in a Chinatown restaurant as he went through a full course meal. That felt more real than him participating in the conversation.

“That’s when the conversation turned to the sickness in my eyes. They seemed so concerned that it made us feel uncomfortable. The

problem came when they started asking detailed questions about how my eye illness came to be.”

I gulped. Decades ago, Masashi tried to rob a bank and the injury he sustained as he was fleeing the police remained in his eyes. His current illness was related to that event—of course, it wasn’t something that could easily be explained.

It was only a few months ago that Masashi was even able to come clean to his wife, Shinobu.

“My original plan had been to tell them everything, but Shinobu was adamant that we absolutely not say anything about my criminal history. I had already served my sentence and reformed... there was no need to go out of my way to talk about it. I more or less agreed and went to the dinner meeting not planning to say anything but...”

...Masashi stopped talking suddenly. We looked at his face and saw large amounts of sweat flowing from his forehead.

“Did they...somehow find out?” My voice naturally lowered.

Masashi stuck his fingertip behind his sunglasses and rubbed the top of his eye as if to massage it.

“That’s right.”

“How did something like that happen—“

“—I was the one who told them.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. He outed himself on purpose?

“I just couldn’t allow myself to deceive the people who were right in front of me. By the time I noticed, I had already told them everything about my past. Her father still listened to my story, but her mother...it would be better if I didn’t say anything about that.

Masashi gave an evasive explanation. Something terrible must have happened. I could guess what happened after that, but I still wanted to hear it.

“What happened after that?”

“Shinobu argued with her mother and it almost turned into a fight. The meal ended there...all because I made a mess of everything.” Masashi took a deep breath.

It wasn't that I didn't understand his feelings about coming clean, considering how many years he'd suffered with the secret, but if he had just...

“I should have been a little more aware about the time and place...” Masashi said, as if he had read my mind. It seemed the man himself knew it the best.

“Umm...what was it that you wanted to talk about....concerning your wife.” At Shioriko's timid question, Masashi lightly nodded and continued talking.

“Shinobu got angry for my sake, but I believe she still wants to reconcile with her parents. Especially lately, there are many times where she seems to be lost in thought. When I ask her what's going on, she says she's thinking about the books she read a long time ago, but I don't think that's the entire truth. I believe she's worried about the relationship with her parents and is looking for an excuse to go see them.”

Really...?

I felt a little doubtful. When I talked to her before, it had seemed like she didn't want to go home and really just wanted to find book.

“It's most likely that her parents—especially her mother—feel the same way. However, if they see each other again, it might turn into another fight. I'm not saying I want you to mediate between a daughter and her parents...but can I ask you to be there to make sure their quarrels don't get too heated?”

Before Shioriko could respond, Masashi continued.

“By all rights the job of reconciling them should have fallen to me...but I am not permitted to go to their house. They won't even

talk to me if I try to contact them...it weighs on me to push this burden onto you, but please, I need your help.”

Sakaguchi deeply bowed his head.

There wasn't much traffic in the middle of a weekday, and we were on track to arrive a little earlier than expected.

“Did Masa really say that? That I want to fix my relationship with my mother?” Shinobu spoke from the back seat.

“Yes...” Shioriko nodded in the passenger seat next to me.

The shop was closed for the day, and the three of us were currently in the van, headed to Shinobu's home in Totsuka.

“C'mon, that's totally wrong. I really, *truly* don't want to see them. Even this trip is putting me in a bad mood. Look at my face, see?”

I looked back in the rearview mirror and saw her pouting face white-lipped with apprehension. Masashi's suggestion didn't seem plausible if Shinobu looked so distraught just from the idea of seeing her parents again.

“After what she said to Masa...I'll never forgive her, and definitely not just because she's my mother. I don't think anyone but me could understand.”

“I completely understand.” Shioriko nodded with more force than usual.

“There are some things that even parents cannot be forgiven for. Typically, if there's discord between a mother and daughter, the original cause lies with the mother.”

“That's right. Shop owner, you know what you're talking about. That's really how it is.”

Shinobu happily leaned forward and grabbed the passenger seat headrest—this was starting to sound more like a personal conversation.

We continued driving alongside the JR railroad tracks for a short while, and I parked the van in front of a house near the river. It was a large, older house with a kitchen garden set in the wide yard. There was a poster for some political party attached to the block fence.

“It really hasn’t changed at all.”

Shinobu flicked the politician on the poster’s head with her finger and opened the gate. The gatepost had a nameplate with “Kawabata” written on it in blackened block letters. That was probably Shinobu’s maiden name. She stopped in front of the garden furrows that were covered with white plastic with a scowl on her face.

“My mother is really into growing organic vegetables...but nothing she has is worth bragging about. They all grow terribly and usually end up tasteless. But her mood always improves when she talks about her garden.”

Shinobu’s sounded bitter as she talked about her mother. Parents and children that didn’t get along were similar everywhere it seemed.

“What is that...?” Shioriko was pointing to a small wooden house.

It was fairly old and had a roof that looked like it had been repainted many times over. The inside was empty, but there were traces that indicated it had been cleaned recently.

“Oh, that’s where we kept the dog when he was still around...I was in elementary school back then.”

The words written on top of the dog house had all but completely faded from the rain and wind, but were still somewhat legible.

Friendly’s House

“...was Friendly the dog’s name?”

It was a pretty strange name but—

—Shinobu burst into laughter.

“You’re being silly Goura. It’s friendly as in *to have a good relationship*. The dog had an actual name, you know.”

“.....”

...So it was actually *Friendly House*. Certainly a pet owner would be friendly to their own dog, but I didn’t quite see the sense of writing that on the doghouse. Wouldn’t it have been better to write the dog’s name instead?

“Then what was the name of the dog?”

“Tobiku.” Shinobu replied.

“I found him abandoned near the river, and got my parents to let me start raising him...he was with us for about three years. My mother always hated him though. She used to say he was a stupid dog that barked too much.”

Shinobu frowned as she thought back to her childhood memories.

“Certainly he wasn’t the smartest dog, and often tried to run away when I took him on walks. But one day I came back from a school trip at my elementary school and found that he really had disappeared.”

“Why did you name him Tobiku?”

That was also a strange name in itself. Somehow it didn’t seem like a typical name for a dog.

“Umm.....well....ah! That’s it!” Shinobu’s face lit up.

“I got the name from the dog in the book! I told you about the dog who was abandoned when he grew up right!? That dog’s name was Tobiku.”

We finally got a name for one of the people—no, one of the animals that appeared in the story. It didn’t sound like an English name, so maybe the story took place somewhere other than America or England. Of course, there was also the possibility that

the setting was entirely fictional.

Shioriko suddenly lowered her head and put her fist to her lips. She seemed to recall something.

“What is it?”

“Tobiku....I feel like I’ve heard that name somewhere before.”

“Eh? Really? You thought of something?” Shinobu quickly came close.

Shioriko pulled back a little from Shinobu’s close stare.

“N-no, it’s not that I remember anything but...”

“But...?” I urged her on.

“I tend to remember everything I read, so once I learn the name of a character, I also remember the title of the book. I’m not having much luck this time.”

“And it’s not because you’re not feeling well this time is it?”

Previously, she was unable to remember information about a valuable book because of a high fever. However, Shioriko shook her head.

“I’m fine today...it’s just a little frustrating.”

It was finally the agreed upon meeting time, so the three of us walked to the entrance of the house. Shinobu stood in front of the doorbell, but didn’t make any move to press it. Her apprehension at seeing her family again was clear.

“Do you want me to press it?”

She shook her head hard.

“No, it’s OK, I’m fine,” Shinobu replied and took several deep breaths.

Just as she hardened her resolved and pulled her finger back to press the doorbell, the door opened all on its own, and an elderly man with a receding hairline appeared. His downward slanted eyes

and round face resembled Shinobu's to a frightening degree.

"Welcome..." He whispered and looked away from us. It didn't really sound like he was welcoming us. In fact, it felt like what he wanted most was to shut the door.

"Where's mom?" Shinobu asked.

"She's in the bedroom upstairs...go on up." He pulled back into the house before Shioriko and I could even introduce ourselves. By the time we stepped in, he could no longer be seen in the hallway.

"Was that your father?" Shioriko asked Shinobu.

"Yep. He's really quiet, unlike my mother. He hasn't spoken directly to me in decades...but that's how he's always been. I guess our personalities are way too different."

Shinobu explained with a composed attitude as she took off her shoes. She likely didn't get along with her mother for an entirely different reason.

"Please, go up, go up...it's really not my house anymore though." Shinobu grinned as she urged us on.

The bedroom on the second floor was apparently Shinobu's old room. I peered into the half open door and saw a pure white bed, drawer set, and desk arranged on the floor. They all had showy designs with lots of curves—not at all like a Japanese room. It looked like a hotel room from the way everything was set up.

A white haired woman who'd been sitting in the room stood and walked towards us. Her round face was the same as Shinobu's but the difference in their mouths widened the unbalance; her expression was sharp as if she were putting on a performance.

A mocking smile floated onto her face.

"What a surprise, you're actually on time. How truly rare."

Her voice was hoarse, but she had a crisp, youthful way of speaking. It furthered my impression of her being a pushy, strong

willed person.

“Are these the friends from the secondhand bookstore you talked about? They’re so young...well, I suppose that’s fine. You’ve always been childish like that.”

The woman spat out sarcastically. She had an even sharper tongue than I’d imagined. Shinobu’s expression quickly stiffened.

“These two are from a well-established bookstore in Kita-Kamakura, Ms. Shinokawa and Mr. Goura”

“All the way from Kita-Kamakura?” Her exasperated voice echoed through the room as she looked at the ceiling in amazement.

“I’m sorry for the trouble my daughter is causing you...she really is stupid. I’m Kawabata Mizue, nice to meet you.”

After casually insulting her daughter, she had suddenly lowered her head. We scrambled to return the bow in a panic. Shioriko glanced around worriedly; she seemed to be frightened by Kawabata’s harsh choice of words.

“Right, about the book we talked about over the phone.” Shinobu got the ball rolling with a sullen look on her face. She probably wanted to finish everything up before she ran out of patience.

“Ah, the book you read as a child you mean.” Kawabata Mizue pulled a large cardboard box from out of the white desk.

“There were some books among the things you left behind. It’s all useless junk though.” She let out a derisive snort.

I was starting to feel more and more uncomfortable. She seemed to have something bad to say about her daughter each and every time she opened her mouth.

“...Can we open it?” I asked Shinobu, and she nodded wordlessly.

I looked through the contents and saw that there were indeed some books stuffed into the cardboard box. However, I only saw high school textbooks and old volumes of shoujo manga.

“You see how there aren’t any novels? This girl always hated reading. I would buy books for her sometimes, but she barely even looked at them.”

“Wh-what did you do with those books?” Shioriko, who had been silent until now, timidly asked. She clearly felt overwhelmed by Shinobu’s mother.

“I remember throwing them out a really long time ago. They’d been stored in the basement even before this girl left home. Other things aside, I didn’t think she’d have any need for books. Maybe it was mixed in among those.”

I went through everything in the box one more time, just in case, as I listened to the conversation. As expected, there wasn’t a single children’s book inside. Just as I resigned myself and put the textbooks and manga back into the box, a single photograph slipped out from between volumes of *Asari-chan* and *Hot Road* manga. It looked like it had gotten stuck between the books by chance. I innocently picked it up and brought it closer to my face.

Pictured was a young girl in a sailor uniform standing next to a middle aged woman wearing a dark blue suit. The middle aged woman didn’t have white hair or wrinkles, but she looked otherwise identical to the Kawabata Mizue in front of my eyes.

The problem was the young girl. Her bleached hair was styled into a frizzy perm and she was scowling directly at the camera with her hands in the pockets of a skirt that almost hid her feet. She was the very picture of a delinquent girl. So it wasn’t just in manga and dramas, there really were people like that, huh.

Hm?

The makeup was different so I didn’t notice it at first, but now that I looked at her face more carefully, the girl really resembled Sakaguchi Shinobu.

“W-wait, Goura, give that back.”

She hastily snatched the photo away from me and stuffed it into the pocket of her coat.

“That was....not good...please pretend you didn’t see that, you two.” She smiled to hide her embarrassment. It seemed like it was from a past she wanted to forget, but her mother had already latched onto the photo.

“That’s the commemorative photograph we took when you got into high school, isn’t it? This girl had been like that since middle school. She really is stupid.”

She turned to Shioriko and me and, as if bragging, brightly continued.

“She used to hang around by Yokohama station every night, you know. Oh, and one night when she was in her first year of high school, she was caught by the police buying beer from a vending machine.”

“An upper classman asked me to buy it for them, I didn’t have a choice. I’ve told you that a million times already.”

“I’m saying that buying it just because you were told was in itself stupid. Either way, you still liked alcohol. Even when we were in Chinatown before, you got carried away and drank so much.”

“I stopped drinking a while ago. Weren’t you the one who ordered the bottle of Shaoxing wine in the first place?”

“Stopped drinking, you say? It hasn’t even been two months since then. I did it because you were in such a bad mood. Your husband was just sitting there sullenly and didn’t say a word the entire time. That was already creepy enough, but when he suddenly started talking...”

Suddenly, Shinobu hit the wall with the palm of her hand. The shock that was enough to shake the room itself ran through the walls.

“It’s one thing to talk about me, but if you insult Masa like that, I’ll

throw you out of the window!”

Even Kawabata Mizue was pressured into silence by her outburst.

“...Can you remember anything about the book that Shinobu is searching for?” Shioriko murmured.

I looked at the side of her face. It may have just been my imagination, but her expression looked strained. Her countenance seemed clearly different from before.

“A dog named Tobiku appeared in the story, so this would have been a little before you started raising a dog in this house.”

“Ah, that stupid dog.” Kawabata Mizue spat out. “I knew that name Tobiku came from a book...I think the title was hard to remember. Let’s see...what could it have been?”

A silence hung over the room. There was no heating in the room, and all of our breaths were coming out white. Shinobu’s mother looked around the room as if to search for a clue, until at last she shook her head.

“Unfortunately, I just can’t remember.”

“Would your husband know by any chance?”

“I asked him earlier, but he said he didn’t know either. He was busy back then and barely spent any time at home. He probably wouldn’t have known what books a child was reading.”

“Is that so...” Shioriko sounded disappointed.

In the end, we weren’t able to find any clues even after coming all this way. Even Shioriko, who was so good at solving mysteries about books, was at a loss this time. There wasn’t anyone who knew the title of the book at this point.

“I’m very sorry. It seems we won’t be able to find your book right away way despite our efforts...” Shioriko apologized and lowered her head. At that, Shinobu lightly clapped both of her shoulders and grinned.

“That’s no good. Shop owner, you have no reason to apologize. I owe you a lot already and can patiently look for it with you. There’s still lots of time.”

“...either way, randomly trying to find a book you read decades ago was pointless to begin with.” Mizue continued with a self-satisfied expression.

“If it were really that important, you should have kept it with you. Stop dragging other people into these worthless matters. You’ve always been stupid like that.”

She put extra emphasis on the word *stupid*. The atmosphere in the room became even colder. I felt a gaze and turned around to look towards the door. Shinobu’s father, who we met earlier, was silently standing in the hallway. He had a look of distress in his eyes, but didn’t intervene. I was the only one who noticed he was there.

“...I’m leaving. I have nothing else here.”

Sakaguchi Shinobu sighed deeply and muttered. Her fists were tightly clenched, but she had yet to lose her cool. I closed the cardboard box and stood up. I really didn’t want to stay any longer either.

“Oh really? Well, say hi to your scary husband for me.”

A thick blood vessel popped up on Shinobu’s temple. She furiously turned around like she was ready to breath fire, but—

“—Miss Kawabata!”

Unexpectedly, Shioriko was the one who raised her voice.

“It’s not worthless.”

“Excuse me?”

“The feeling of wanting to take back a book that was once lost is not in the least bit worthless. Please take that back.”

Even I could tell that Shioriko was now fed up with Mizue.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Shinobu’s mother had a perplexed smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

I on the other hand understood Shioriko’s reaction. She also secretly had a book that she wanted to get back. A book that her mother had also once bought for her, *Cra Cra Diary*.

“Why is it that you still have the doghouse?” Shioriko pressed Mizue for an answer.

It was like a switch had been flipped in her personality, the way it always was when she solved mysteries. But this time, I didn’t know what she was going for. Why was she asking about the doghouse?

“You’re not using it anymore now that the dog is gone. Am I wrong?”

“That’s true...but what about it?”

“The dog hasn’t been around for many years, and yet that doghouse has been meticulously cared for. It’s because you want it to be ready for the day it comes back, isn’t it? Because you hope it will come back someday.

The smirk slowly faded from Kawabata Mizuo’s face. She scowled as if something ached.

“I wouldn’t say it’s because I want the dog to come back...It’s just that I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away. Everyone has things like that right?”

“Is the doghouse the only thing you haven’t thrown away?”

The expression from her face vanished. For a fleeting moment, she glanced at her daughter.

“...All of you please leave. Right away.” She said that squeezing out a raspy voice.

Shioriko and I returned to the shop after dropping Shinobu off at Zushi station. It was almost evening, but I went over to the main

house after parking the car as instructed. Shioriko said she had something she wanted to discuss.

I could hear the sound of a railroad warning signal in the distance.

The two of us sat across from each other at a short round table in the Shinokawa house living room. It was a traditional Japanese style room with a tokonoma and deck, and the large flat screen TV and DVD player they bought last year somehow looked out of place.

I didn't feel as much tension when I went into the main house nowadays. I used to try my best to avoid coming in, but I'd stopped feeling that way just recently. The Shinokawa sisters invited me for afternoon tea and dinner more often now.

"...I didn't mean to say it like that." Shioriko sounded despondent. She had been reflecting on her own words ever since Shinobu's mother expelled us from her house.

"I ended up adding oil to the fire despite Masashi's request..."

"I don't think you did anything wrong. It was inevitable that something would happen when those two met."

Ultimately the search for the book had ended in failure, but Shinobu was oddly calm on the drive back home. She barely made any complaints about her mother.

"You were talking about the room we were in, weren't you?"

The furniture in Shinobu's room has also been maintained, just like the dog house. Even the "worthless things" her mother talked about before were still in the house. She did throw some of her daughter's books away, but those were in storage before Shinobu had even left.

I didn't think it was so much that she wanted Shinobu to come back home as much as it was reluctance to throw away all of her belongings. In the chance that she ever came back home, Shinobu could have a place to return to.

She must have realized that when she saw how shaken her mother was.

“So what Masashi said was correct, huh?”

Sakaguchi Masashi’s opinion was that Shinobu and her parents were both inwardly looking for an opportunity to reconcile.

Kawabata Mizue, who despite continuously calling her daughter stupid, but was unable to throw her possessions away, and Shinobu, who didn’t want to see her mother from the bottom of her heart—they both likely had complex feelings.

“I believe Masashi’s assessment would be accurate for Kawabata Mizue, but Shinobu’s a little more...”

Shioriko abruptly stopped speaking, and took a sidelong glance at the sliding door to the kitchen.

“...what is it?”

She raised her index finger to silence me. With her legs still stretched out to the right, she moved over to the door, grabbed the door handle with her finger, and pulled it wide open.

Shinokawa Ayaka was standing there wearing her school blazer with her ear facing the door. Anyone could see that she’d been eavesdropping.

“Waah!” Ayaka was startled by the sound of the door opening, and almost spilled the glass of milk she had in her hand.

It looked like she had really just arrived home, since her book bag was still on her back.

“Welcome back, Aya.” Shioriko said coolly.

“Eh? Y-yeah, I’m home...”

“You should at least take off your bag when you’re drinking milk.” Shioriko sounded like a parent.

Ayaka, embarrassed, walked into the room and put her school bag

on the floor. She also sat on the floor with her knees together. Her expression was meek and she had forgotten to even drink another sip of milk.

“Aya, eavesdropping is bad.”

“Yeah...I’m sorry. My club ended early so I came home, and I heard your voices when I went to get some milk out of the fridge. Ah, I didn’t hear that much though!”

“How much did you hear?” I asked, and Ayaka took a gulp of milk.

“Just that there was a request from Shinobu’s husband...and she and her mom had an argument. Also something about part of her husband’s story being correct....that’s it.”

Unfortunately, that was everything. Well, I supposed it was also because we were careless.

“I won’t tell anyone so it’s OK! Really! I’ve been more tight-lipped than usual lately.”

Hearing *lately* made me feel all the more uneasy. Shioriko once told me that her sister was bad at hiding things. She certainly didn’t seem all that trustworthy.

“Anyway, don’t tell anyone, OK?”

“Alright, I won’t....sorry.”

With her head down, ponytail and all, she stood up, stepped back out of the room, and closed the sliding door.

“Now we can continue...”

With her right leg still stretched out, Shioriko inched closer to me until she was right in front of my face. Our knees were touching, and she looked up at me from behind her glasses. As always she had little interest in makeup. I didn’t notice it earlier, but suddenly became aware of a fragrance from her hair and skin. It probably wasn’t perfume.

“W-what is it?”

“I’m still worried that my sister can hear us.” She whispered secretly.

Although that was true, I now had something entirely different to worry about.

“This isn’t related to the search for the book, but I noticed something interesting when we were at the Kawabata house.”

“Hm?”

“Do you remember how Shinobu said there was ‘still time’ while we were there?”

“I remember, but...” Honestly, it wasn’t something I thought much of.

“Didn’t that just mean it was OK if we didn’t find the book right away?”

“But it could also mean that there is some sort of time period.”

“Ah, you’re right.”

Come to think of it, that was an interesting choice of words. Shinobu hadn’t mentioned anything at all about a time limit—she just said that she was looking for the book because she couldn’t help being curious.

“What could she have meant?”

“I’ve been trying to think of an explanation for some time now... but I don’t have a clear answer at the moment.”

Her line of sight fell to my chest. The tips of her hair fell on her knees.

This is not good, I thought.

Even so, I intended to keep myself together.

Looking away from the downcast Shioriko, my eyes fell to the school bag that Ayaka had left behind. There were several trinkets hanging off the strap, one of them a keychain of a monkey-like

character with large ears. No, maybe it wasn't monkey, but a bear cub.

It was the same character we saw on Kosuga Nao's passcase before. I couldn't remember its name, but I supposed it was popular.

"What is it?" Shioriko must have noticed I was staring at something. She also turned to look at Ayaka's school bag. It wasn't like I saw anything particularly important though.

"Nothing...ah, I was wondering what that monkey-ish character on the bag was." Startled, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. Shioriko pushed her glasses up with a finger as she squinted at it.

"Oh, umm, the brown one right? I feel like I saw my sister watching a DVD with that character. It was around the beginning of the year I think..."

It seemed she was having trouble remembering. This type of response was refreshing.

Come to think of it, her knowledge was mainly on book related subjects. She couldn't demonstrate her unrivaled memory for things besides literature I supposed.

Suddenly, the sliding door opened up and Shinokawa Ayaka appeared again. She had changed out of her school uniform and was now wearing a jersey.

"Sorry, I forgot my bag....really sorry about that."

She noticed Shioriko and me sitting together with our knees touching and made an exaggerated effort to look away with her eyes shut. It wasn't like she was seeing anything she wasn't supposed to though.

"I won't get in the way anymore so don't worry! Take your time..." She let out a line like a waitress at a Japanese inn and picked up her bag. Just as she was about to close the door—

“Ah, Aya, wait!” Shioriko hastily called to stop her. The door, already almost completely closed, opened up halfway.

“What is the name of that brown monkey-like character on your bag?”

Ayaka peered down at her bag, pinched the character and lifted him up. There was also a small figure of a dog attached to the same keychain. They must have come as a set.

“Do you mean this one? He’s called Cheburashka, he’s the main character of this puppet animation. From Russia, I think.”

Cheburashka. I felt like I had heard the name before.

“I borrowed the DVD from Nao. It’s a really old movie, but really good. It’s a cute story but somehow has a lonely feeling. A new movie is in theaters now; I went with Nao to see it before.”

I finally realized the connection. Kosuga Nao had the same Cheburashka passcase because she was a fan. They’d probably been on their way to see the new movie the day Shinobu and I ran into them.

“The new movie was good too. I bought this keychain when we went to see it. The dog is cute too.”

Ayaka lightly touched the dog figure hanging from the keychain with her finger.

“His name’s Tobiku; he’s Cheburashka’s friend.”

“Tobiku?” Shioriko and eye raised our voices at the same time.

“Umm...yeah...what’s with that reaction?”

“Was Tobiku a dog abandoned by his owner?” Shioriko asked.

“Eh? I wonder...I guess he *was* crying by the roadside. But then he met Cheburashka and became friends with a lion.”

Shioriko and I listened to Ayaka’s perplexed response and glanced at each other. The dog became friends with a lion. The protagonist

was different, but there were many similarities with Sakaguchi Shinobu's story. The book she read must have been the source material for the movie, or perhaps she mistook the movie for a book. The reason Shioriko's memory was so vague was because it was relating to a movie, not a book.

If we investigated this further we should find the book that Shinobu was looking for.

“What's wrong...?”

Though it seemed to me we'd solved the mystery of the book, Shioriko's expression did not clear up.

“Nothing....I understand about the book, but it's just that...”

She didn't try to explain any further. At any rate, it seemed there were some mysteries remaining.

We met with the Sakaguchi couple again almost a week later.

Shioriko figured out which book Shinobu was looking for right away, but it took that much time to actually get it into our hands. It wasn't listed in online catalogues for secondhand bookstores and didn't appear in any web auctions either. We were finally able to find it after reaching out to an antiquarian bookshop that specialized in children's literature.

“To begin with, children's books are hard to find on the market.” Shioriko explained. “The readers are young, so they often don't stay well preserved. They often get thrown away as well.”

Correspondingly, there were also few shops that dealt with children's literature. Finding the book would have been a difficult task even if we'd known the title from the outset. We got lucky this time.

I had rented a *Cheburashka* DVD from the video store while we waited for the book to arrive. Taking a DVD case that had puppet

characters featured prominently on the cover up to the counter was embarrassing, but I really wanted to see it no matter what.

When I took it home to watch, my mother at first exclaimed how shocking it was that I was still renting cartoons like this at my age, but at some point she came in to silently watch it with me. The DVD contained four different stories, but the book that Shinobu was looking for was covered by the first episode.

The setting was a town in Russia, and the story began with a mysterious animal arriving from Africa by chance. He fell every time anyone tried to get him to sit, so he was named *Cheburashka*, or “topple.”

Since no one wanted to take care of him, Cheburashka took to living in a telephone booth and began to get along with a lonely crocodile named Gena who was trying to gather friends. The dog we’d heard about from Shinobu, Tobiku, and the lion were also lonely characters who became friends with Gena.

And so, the lonely characters came together and built a “House of Friends.” They put their efforts together and didn’t get discouraged by the obstruction of a mischief loving old lady called Shapoklyak. However, by the time they were done, the characters were no longer lonely and didn’t need a “House of Friends” anymore.

In the end, they donated the house to a kindergarten, and the first episode ended with them reconciling with Shapoklyak.

I thought the characters were cute and that it was a good movie, but it bothered me that Cheburashka and his friends didn’t get rewarded in any way. Although they all acted cheerfully, the story still had a somewhat depressing undertone.

The Sakaguchi couple arrived shortly after the shop closed up for the day. Shinobu walked in with her husband’s hand on her shoulder as we totaled the day’s sales at the register.

“Shop owner, Goura, good evening.” As she greeted us with her usual cheerful smile, she noticed the other guest who’d arrived

before her.

A round faced old man was standing with his back to the glass case.

“...Dad.”

Shinobu said that like she had something stuck in her throat. It was her father, Kawabata.

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to know what kind of book you were looking for.” He replied falteringly.

Rather than being unsociable, it seemed he was just bad at talking. Even a few days ago when he called the shop, he asked over and over to be told what book his daughter was searching for. When we told him that it had arrived and about our promise to hand it over to Shinobu, he said he wanted to be there. He most likely wanted to meet his daughter again, but talked only about the book until the very end.

“I wasn’t told about this.” Shinobu looked dissatisfied as she looked at Shioriko and me.

Shinobu didn’t particularly get along with her father either. She told us before that he barely ever talked to her.

“I got the message from Goura, but forgot to tell you. I’m sorry,” Masashi quietly apologized.

He probably didn’t tell her on purpose. Shinobu did not further touch upon the subject of her father and turned to Shioriko.

“Well then, did you really find it? The book we were looking for.”

“I did...there is no doubt. As we discussed on the phone, it is the source book for the puppet animation, *Cheburashka*.”

“Ah, that’s right. We rented the movie after you told us about it. It really cute! Look at this!”

She took a cellphone out of her coat pocket and set it on the counter. A figure of Cheburashka holding an orange was attached to the strap.

“I ended up buying this. Isn’t it great!?”

“Ah....yes, it is.” Shioriko smiled ambiguously. She probably didn’t have much interest in small cute animals. Shinobu lightly touched the figure’s large ears.

“But this is completely different from the Cheburashka that I remember...maybe I was mistaken...”

I was also curious about that. The black tanuki-like animal that Shinobu drew before didn’t have the slightest resemblance to this one.

“No, you weren’t mistaken. The picture you drew neatly captured its image.”

“Eh, but...”

“Please have a look.”

Shioriko reached under the counter and pulled out a single book—Uspensky’s ***Cheburashka & Friends***, published by Shindokusho-sha. Ijuin Toshitaka was the translator. The cover had a blue background with a picture of a giraffe holding a sign. Next to it were a monkey, a crocodile, and a pitch black tanuki-like animal—

“Ah, that’s it! It was this book, this is what I drew!” Shinobu excitedly pointed to the black animal. Its face looked like a bear cub, but the long tail did indeed look like a tanuki’s. It was strikingly similar to Shinobu’s drawing.

“Is this really Cheburashka?”

Shioriko nodded. This one was as also a strange creature, but still, they were way too different. I doubted anyone would think they were the same character if they were placed side by side.

“Why do they look so different?”

“I did some research on it and...”

After a brief preamble, Shioriko began to explain. The Sakaguchis and I gathered around the counter.

“When Eduard Uspensky wrote *Cheburashka & Friends*—known originally as *Gena the Crocodile and His Friends*—the design for Cheburashka had not yet been finalized. The illustrations in the book were done in the late 1960s by a man named Alfeyevsky.”

“So when was the design finalized?”

“When the first animated film was released in late 1969. It was then that the director, Roman Kachanov, and art director, Leonid Shvartsman, collaborated to come up with the current design.”

That made sense. So the appearance used in the movie became the final one. The version drawn in the book seemed interesting too though.

“Hmm 1969 you say...I wasn’t even born back then. Was this book made before then?” Shinobu asked.

“No. The Japanese translation was published in 1970.”

“But the movie was already out by that point.”

“There certainly were already two *Cheburashka* films by then, but Soviet puppet animations were rarely ever played in theaters, and there were few who knew about them in Japan. I don’t believe they had any reason to use the design from the film.”

In other words, the Japanese translation had no relation to the movie, it was simply released as a children’s book by the author Eduard Uspensky.

“This version of the book eventually went out of print, but the same publishing company re-released it in 2001. The version of *Cheburashka* from the film was drawn on the cover, but the illustrations inside the book were identical to this one.”

“Can that version be purchased in book stores even now?”

Shioriko nodded.

“So that’s how it was...” Shinobu took *Cheburashka & Friends* and began to flip through the pages.

“This is really nostalgic...this is...a little different from the animation. There was supposed to be a rhino that ran around the town...ah there it is.”

Shinobu brought the open pages closer to her face and smiled happily. Perhaps this is how she read the book when she was a child.

“Mr. Kawabata...”

Suddenly, Shioriko called out to Shinobu’s father. He had been hesitantly keeping his distance and standing alone.

“Can you please take a look at the book as well?”

The older man seemed a little lost, but he took an old pair of glasses out of his pocket. Shinobu silently handed the book to him. For a while, the only thing that could be heard in the shop was the sound of pages turning.

“...So this is the Friendly House.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t that what’s written on the dog house? *Friendly House*,” he said that as he showed his daughter the book.

The Friendly House is now open

We welcome anyone in need of friends.

I remembered the doghouse at the Kawabata house. Perhaps this was the same “House of Friends” that appeared in the movie. A place where lonely people could gather. The house that everyone put all their effort into and worked hard together to build, but never ended up using. Like Tobiku, the name for the dog house also came from this book.

“That’s right. It came from this book.” Shinobu’s reply was unusually bright and dry.

“That’s the first time you’ve asked...I mean, you and mom barely ever asked me any questions. You never said anything, and mom was always scolding me. Nobody in the house ever knew what I was thinking.”

I gulped. So she picked up the abandoned dog and raised him in the Friendly House, where lonely people gathered. The feelings represented by her actions were painfully clear.

“I wanted a *Friendly House* of my own...that’s why I wanted to leave the moment I finished high school. I hated that house so much it made me sick.”

“Shinobu...?” Masashi whispered. His wife’s face was pale. She was probably feeling unwell, just like when we visited her parent’s home.

“I’m alright...I’m not angry or anything. It’s not like I ever listened to anything mom said either. Even Tobiku...I picked him up on my own and started raising him even though I was told not to. I caused a lot of trouble...I was so stupid.”

“I told you this a long time ago.” Masashi spoke stiffly. “You aren’t stupid. I guarantee it.”

“...Thank you.” Shinobu smiled.

Kawabata quietly took off his glasses and closed the book before returning it to Shinobu. His eyes looked far away and somewhat vacant.

“Really, I...don’t know much about you.”

“Well of course. You don’t talk with me that much even now...well, you weren’t ever in the house back then either, you were so busy with work.”

“...You’re wrong.” He made a brusque denial.

“I...was avoiding you. Because I was afraid.”

“Huh?”

Shinobu’s eyes went wide.

“Your personality and sense of values seemed so different from your mother’s and I...especially around when you were starting middle school. I just didn’t know how to treat you. The same goes for your mother. She didn’t know how to talk to you without criticizing you....she’s still like that.”

That straightforward confession left me dumbfounded. Shinobu made a sour face and looked away.

“I can’t believe a convenient story like that. She only calls me an idiot every time she sees me.”

“Shinobu...” Shioriko quietly spoke up. “Please remember the dog house.”

Shinobu fell silent. Kawabata Mizue had not thrown away the dog house. It wasn’t just that, she hadn’t thrown away her daughter’s belongings either.

“I want you to try talking with your mother again.” Kawabata finally looked his daughter in the eye. Sweat was starting to appear on his large forehead, perhaps due to the tension. Despite that, Shinobu shook her head.

“She can insult me if she wants, but I’ll never forget what she said to Masa. If she won’t come and apologize herself, then I don’t want to see her.”

“...Shinobu, I also think you should.” Masashi’s refined voice sounded in the room. “I should have chosen a better time and place to tell my story. It was only natural that your mother was startled.”

I remembered what Kawabata Mizue said before, to leave her regards with Shinobu’s scary husband. That wasn’t sarcasm—no, even if a big part of it was sarcastic, she’d probably been honestly

afraid of him to an extent.

“Did your mother tell you about the time Tobiku went missing?” Kawabata abruptly changed the topic. For a moment, Shinobu was taken aback.

“I was told that he escaped through a gap as she was repairing the fence while I was on a school trip. The dog was so dumb that it didn’t even know his own house, is what she said. Is that wrong?”

“No, that part is true. What I want to say is, your mother has always been looking for Tobiku.”

“What?”

“She said she was going to find him before you got back from your trip, and even took the day of work. She wasn’t able to find him, but even after that, she continued to look for him on her off days. She’s also the one who’s been maintaining the dog house all these years. Your mother may have talked ill of the dog, but she did feel a sense of responsibility towards it. She’s not someone entirely without emotion.”

Shinobu’s eyes fell to the copy of ***Cheburashka & Friends*** in her hands. As if she were confirming something, she turned the book over several times.

“Alright. I’ll think about it.” After muttering that, Shinobu looked up and faced Shioriko across the counter.

“Thank you very much for this book. I’d like to buy it...how much does it cost?”

She reached for her wallet, but Shioriko quietly stood up.

“...Shop owner?”

“You don’t need to pay for it.”

“Eh? Why?”

I was also surprised. We paid money to buy the book from another store. It wasn’t an outrageously high price, but it wasn’t

trivial either.

“No way, I can’t do that. Let me pay for it.”

“No. I want to give this to you. As a congratulatory gift.”

Shinobu, who was just about to pull out cash from her wallet, froze. She looked around at the other three people in the room before smiling weakly at Shioriko.

“...You knew?”

“So it was true.”

I didn’t get it. Masashi, who was standing next to Shinobu, also looked perplexed.

“How did you find out? It’s alright, please tell me.”

“I noticed that there were a lot of things you quit doing, like smoking, drinking alcohol, and wearing high heels. Moreover, your condition hasn’t seemed too good lately. There was a time once when my mother was like that...shortly before my younger sister was born.”

“Ah...” I exclaimed without thinking.

Even I could understand what Shioriko meant by that. This was what she had realized that was unrelated to the mystery of the book.

Shinobu placed the book on the counter and turned to look at her husband with a renewed expression. Masashi’s eyes were completely wide behind his glasses.

“Masa. I’m pregnant.”

I remembered what Shinobu told me when we talked near the beginning of the year.

I quit smoking...it’s better that way they say.

I thought she was talking about the increased price of tobacco at the time, but there was no doubt it was for the sake of her unborn

child. She had given me the hint from the very beginning.

“I wasn’t able to conceive for a long time...and was starting to think it was impossible. I’m not at an age where I can try hard for it either... but still, we went on vacations many times right? While we were on vacation, we got in the mood, and...”

Shinobu put her index fingers together and fidgeted. Shioriko, who had been nodding as she listened along, suddenly turned bright red.

“Wh-why didn’t you...erm...tell me before?” Masashi finally asked with great difficulty. He was unusually tongue tied.

“Masa, I was having a hard time myself. I was worried about what would be the right time to tell you. I’m sorry for not saying anything...do you want to keep it?” She casually asked as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Masashi’s pursed lips were trembling uncontrollably. No doubt there were numerous thoughts racing through his head.

“...If you're fine with my children.” He sounded like he was about to cry.

“I’ve never thought of having anyone else’s. Silly.” Shinobu grinned.

That was when I realized that Kawabata had disappeared from behind the counter at some point. He was standing between the dim bookshelves and appeared to be talking softly to someone on his cell phone.

“I guess you also know the real reason I was looking for this book.” Shinobu asked Shioriko.

“That’s right...of course we already knew you wanted to read it... but you also want to read the book to your child one day too...is that it?”

“That’s exactly right. Shop owner, you really are smart.”

So this is what she Shinobu meant when she said there was still time left to find the book. If this was the case, then we certainly did have time.

Just then, Shinobu's father, who'd been talking on his phone, returned. Seeing him standing near the counter as if he hadn't left, his daughter frowned.

"You were talking to mom, weren't you?"

"I was..." Kawabata readily admitted it. "Your mother noticed that your condition wasn't good. She's been saying that just maybe you were pregnant. She's always been worried about you, that's why..."

I want you to see her was probably what he wanted to say. Shioriko, Masashi, and I waited for Shinobu's answer. However, she looked away in disappointment

"If that's true, then she should talk to me herself. How can she be serious if she's just hearing messages about my condition over the phone..."

Shinobu turned her eyes to the entrance of the shop and snapped silent. Someone was standing behind the glass door and curtain. It was a small seemingly female silhouette. Even I realized who she was right away.

"She came with me...at least up to Kita-Kamakura station." Kawabata awkwardly explained.

The person outside hesitated for a little while before finally, bit by bit, opening the sliding door. Their figure came into view from between the curtains. Kawabata stood with her back to the door, seemingly frozen, as she stared at Shinobu with her large eyes. None of the other people in the shop even registered in her view.

"Have you been going to the doctor?" Her voice was surprisingly sharp.

"I have..."

“Do you really want to give birth?”

Shinobu nodded. Kawabata Mizue shook her head in amazement.

“You’re not young anymore you know. You’ll already have to look after your sick older husband. If you include giving birth to a child, it absolutely won’t be just a minor hardship. Have you considered that?”

Shinobu’s expression did not flinch even at this. She nodded even more vigorously than before.

“Listen, Shinobu...”

“Mom, I...” Shinobu suddenly opened her mouth. “When I was little, I wanted to live in a friendly house...one where I wouldn’t feel lonely, and I could live in peace. When I got married to this man, I thought I had finally found a home like that.”

Her mother had an incredulous expression and began to reply, but Shinobu interrupted her and continued.

“But you know, I found that really wasn’t enough. This time, I will bring someone into this world. I’m not a lonely child anymore. I’ll be fine...I’ve gotten a little stronger, and...I’ll never shut out a child coming into my home. I would much rather go through any hardship.”

A hush fell over the store as Kawabata Mizue looked her daughter in the eye. For a while, she stood as still as a statue.

“You really are stupid,” she uttered at last, taking a deep breath.

“Father, I’m going home first.” Mizue turned on her heels and left. As expected, getting them to reconcile was impossible. Just as we began to feel disappointed, Kawabata Mizue, before closing the door, turned to glance at her daughter.

“Shinobu, next time, you should come to our house...together with your husband.” She said that in a slightly gentler voice than usual.

“And about what you said before...there’s a lot we need to talk

about.”

CHAPTER 3

SPRING AND ASURA

“Coffee’s on me,” was the first thing Takino Renjou said.

He’d arrived only five minutes later than our agreed meeting time, but clearly had no intention of listening to my objections. Insisting that it was cheap and I shouldn’t worry about it, Takino invited me to a chain coffee shop near the bus station.

“There aren’t many cafes that open early even around the station.”

The two of us were sitting next to the window facing outside. This was my first time coming to Hongodai, and although the roads felt awfully wide, there still weren’t many shops at the station. The newly built apartment buildings were tidy and provided for a nice view—completely different from Ofuna, with its older, rundown buildings.

It was already the end of February. Outside the window, I saw several women shivering in front of the supermarket as they waited for it to open. The weather looked like it could start to sleet at any moment.

“Sorry about calling you over so suddenly on your day off.”

“Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t doing much, and it wasn’t much of a trip,” I replied.

There was only one station between Ofuna, where I lived, and Hongodai, but I didn’t have any friends or relatives that lived in the area and had never come here before.

It was just this morning that Takino called me. I was perplexed when he first said that he finally managed to get some free time and wanted to meet up and talk—but then I remembered how he told me a while ago that he wanted to have a long talk about Shioriko’s

mother the next time he was available.

...And that was why I was currently in Hongodai, near Takino's shop.

"How has Shinokawa been lately? Is she doing fine...ah, my bad. Do you mind if I smoke?" Takino asked as an afterthought.

He had already taken out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

I nodded.

"She's doing fine. Her leg also seems to be getting better."

"Ah, that's good to hear." He opened the lid of his lighter with a clink and lit his cigarette.

Shioriko had recently begun to regain normal function of her leg. It wasn't completely healed of course, but the hope was that she'd eventually be able to live normally without her cane.

"Has anything else changed?"

"Not really...I guess." I answered hesitantly.

It wasn't completely true that nothing at all had changed. Ever since the incident with Sakaguchi Shinobu's book last month, Shioriko started talking about her mother more often. I say *talking* but it was mostly complaining. She'd been saying things like, "She caused me a lot of trouble when she disappeared all of a sudden," or, "She's someone who never listened to what others had to say." Still, it was refreshing to see her being open about her feelings. Perhaps seeing Shinobu earnestly talk with her mother from whom she had been separated for decades was still on her mind.

"I shouldn't have asked such a weird question." Takino smiled wryly as he put out his cigarette on the ashtray.

"Does Shinokawa get more guests these days? Like meeting people in the main house more often."

"I don't believe so...why do you ask?" There wasn't anything like that as far as I knew. I obviously didn't know what she did on my

off days like today though.

“I was little curious after *The Dandelion Girl* was stolen. I think this only started after you started working there... but does Shinokawa sometimes do consultations with customers that come into the shop? Dealing with book related troubles and the like.”

“Yes, that happens from time to time.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s something I’ve been hearing from customers when I do home calls in Kamakura. Rumors about how the bookshop in Kita-Kamakura is now taking requests again. I didn’t think they were serious at the time though.”

Takino’s expression was serious as he blew out smoke towards the ground.

“You say again...as in, this is something that’s been done before?”

“Yeah. By Shinokawa’s mom...you didn’t know?”

I nodded wordlessly. I hadn’t heard about this from Shioriko.

“I only heard the rumors after I started working myself, but it seemed she often helped people with stuff like finding stolen books. I heard she didn’t always hand the culprits over to the police when she found them though.”

It was a subtle way of saying it, but that sounded familiar. Apparently, decades ago, Shionokawa Chieko once found the culprit who stole a first edition copy of *The Final World War*—and then extorted him out of the rest of his other valuable first edition books.

“She used them for business I’m guessing.”

Takino’s mouth became slightly taut. He must have realized I was familiar with Biblia’s history to some degree.

“Something like that, yeah.” He put out his cigarette stub on the ashtray.

“What I want to say is, those are the kind of rumors going around, and there’s a possibility that some unpleasant requests might come

your way. I think you should be careful...well, not that Shinokawa is going to go sticking her head into danger anyway.

“.....”

I couldn't feel as optimistic when I remembered how far Shioriko went to protect her first printing of Daizai Osamu's *And Then*. She also had a sort of obsessive mindset that she would do anything to get what she wanted into her hands. Even if she wasn't conspiring with criminals, there was a risk that she would do something unpredictable.

Hm? I looked up at Takino.

“You said since I started working. Does that mean she didn't accept book related requests before?”

That was unexpected in its own way. I was under the impression that she would go anywhere if it was related to old books.

“I believe so...” Takino answered. “I don't think she wanted to do the same things her mother did. In the first place, she's always been extremely good with books, but not so much at dealing directly with people.”

Certainly, she was the type of person to hide behind her wall of books in the store. What was the reason for the change then?

“I think it's because she met you.”

“Huh?”

“Because you're always happy to listen to her talk about books. I think her feelings of wanting to talk to you and wanting to get closer to you got stronger, and she started to feel more positive about taking requests.”

I gulped. Was this really true? Of course, it had to be; this was her childhood friend talking.

“I mean, it would make things interesting if that were the case. I don't really understand what she's thinking to be honest, hahaha,”

Takino guffawed.

I didn't find it quite as amusing. He was clearly making fun of me.

"Was Shioriko's father aware of what his wife was doing?" The smile disappeared from Takino's face when I changed the subject. He took out another cigarette and lit it as he gathered his thoughts.

"I wonder...in the first place, no one's really sure how far she went with her dealings. I can't imagine that he was completely unaware though..."

"Do you think he cooperated with her...?" I cautiously asked.

If that were the case, then dangerous transactions like the one with the copy of *The Final World War* they found would involve the entire store.

"I don't know," Takino shook his head.

"But the old man was, for better or for worse, earnest to a fault. He would not have helped with a suspicious transaction. On top of that, Shioriko's mother was the one who handled mail orders and almost all of the inventory management. If he did have a slight suspicion, then there must have been a reason he chose to stay silent."

I took a sip of my now cold coffee. The number of mysteries surrounding Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia was only increasing. What was Shinokawa Chieko really doing at Biblia? Why did she disappear? Where was she now? —and most importantly, how was she getting information about us?

"Ah, right. I almost forgot."

Takino pulled out a manila envelope from his pocket.

"I'm giving this to you. Look inside"

I opened the envelope as he instructed and pulled out a black and white photograph. In the picture, I saw a family of four standing in front of Biblia.

The first person my eyes fell to was the girl in braids standing next to the rotating iron sign. The uniform she wore resembled the middle school uniform of Seioujo Academy, a catholic middle and high school for girls at the edge of Kamakura.

She was smaller and thinner than she was now, but this was, without a doubt, Shioriko. Perhaps she was being urged to smile, but the image of her desperately lifting the corners of her mouth was cute.

Next to her stood her father, the previous owner of the shop. He didn't look to be quite in his forties. He looked younger than I remembered, with a smile on his angular face. Next to him was a tall and slim woman looking to the side. She was holding a four or five year old child in her arms.

That person was definitely Shinokawa Chieko, and the little girl was probably Shinokawa Ayaka. She was holding on to her mother's neck and grinning at the camera. Although half of her face was hidden by Ayaka, I could see that Chieko was also smiling happily. Her clothing choice, of a plain sweater and blouse, and her long hair were strikingly similar to Shioriko's today.

"I took this picture a year before her mom disappeared. I think this is the only picture with all of them together."

The Shioriko from this picture didn't resemble her mother at all. Her clothes were of course different, and more importantly, she wasn't wearing glasses.

"Was Shioriko's eyesight better back then?"

"No, she's been nearsighted ever since she was a kid. She might have been wearing contacts for the picture."

So that's what it was. She looked really different without her glasses.

"You said this was the only family photo; why aren't there others?"

"Because Shinokawa's mother hated having her picture taken. I

even heard there weren't any wedding photos...actually, her daughter hated them just as much. That's why the two of them don't look especially happy in the photo. Her mom was probably looking to the side on purpose, come to think of it. Still, it's a good picture."

I could understand why he felt proud of it. The picture perfectly captured that single moment of happiness.

"Yeah, it is."

"Why are you giving this to me anyway?"

"I thought you'd want a picture of Shinokawa when she was younger. Am I wrong?" Takino was grinning broadly.

I didn't try to deny it. Of course I wanted the picture.

"Thank you very much." I thanked him and put the envelope with the photo into my pocket.

I forgot about the photo after I parted ways with Takino.

I only remembered it three days later, when I returned to the store after buying lunch at a convenience store. I took the photo from my pocket as I stood in front of the house. Compared to the photo, the scenery had hardly changed at all.

The photo was taken in the early summer, and between the fence of the neighboring house, hydrangeas could be seen blooming. It was a common flower in the area, but since it was currently winter, the branches and leaves were still bare.

The scenery now was startlingly similar, but the family in the photo had changed greatly. The daughter had grown up, the father had passed away, and the mother was nowhere to be found.

I stared at Shinokawa Chieko's half hidden face. This photo didn't show it clearly, but I knew what her face looked like. There was a painting featuring a woman exactly like Shioriko reading a book on the second floor of the main house and—come to think of it, I didn't know who made that painting either.

“Daisuke.”

Shioriko, who had come out of the store, was standing next to the sign before I realized it. She was in the exact same position as the photograph.

“What are you looking at?”

“Ah, it’s just a picture that Takino gave me and...”

The moment I showed her the picture with a light mood, Shioriko’s face turned bright red, as if she’d been boiled.

Before I knew it, she clicked her cane forward and snatched the photo out of my hands.

“H-how, w-where did you get this?”

She turned the picture over and tightly held it to her chest. I saw it sink deeply into her sweater and looked away.

“Like I said, Takino gave it to me.” I finally realized my mistake. Takino *did* say before that Shioriko hated getting her picture taken.

“I never know what kind of face to make when I get my picture taken.” Shioriko sounded despondent. “This picture was like that too. It always felt unnatural and I didn’t like it...I didn’t like my face in the first place...”

“You look cute in the picture...I like it at least.”

That was an ambitious statement for me. A silence hung over the not busy road. She hesitantly took a glance at the picture at her chest and sighed deeply.

“Thank you very much.” She bowed stiffly, and returned to the store shaking her head. She probably thought I was being considerate of her. Also, she never returned the picture.

“Oh, that’s right.” Shioriko turned around in the corridor lined with books.

“Daisuke, do you have plans tonight?”

“No, I don’t have any...”

For a moment, she looked down with a worried look. She seemed lost about something.

“If it’s alright with you, can you go out with me for about an hour?”

“Eh?”

“There’s a place I have to go to this evening,” she continued.

The sun had completely set by the time we finished closing up and left the shop.

Shioriko said there wasn’t any need to take the car since the destination wasn’t too far. I matched her pace and we began to walk along the road parallel to the train station. There were barely any people going in the opposite direction of the Kita-Kamakura station ticket gates. We passed through a cave-like tunnel that was hollowed out in the cliffs. The rock ceiling of the tunnel was just over my head, so I ducked out of habit.

“I got a call from someone claiming to be one of my mother’s classmates earlier today.” Shioriko explained as we walked.

“A classmate...from when?”

“From middle and high school apparently. She lives in a house in Kita-Kamakura from her father’s generation and has been there for a long time...that’s the house we’re headed to now.”

“Umm, wait a second please.” I interrupted her story. “Which school did your mother go to?”

“Seioujo Academy...I don’t believe I’ve told you that before.”

It was my first time hearing about it. Shioriko also attended Seioujo...so both she and her mother had gone to the same school.

“Has your mother always lived in the area?”

“Yes, she grew up in Fukasawa, I believe.” Shioriko answered. That made sense since her mother used to be a regular customer at Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.

“What about her family?”

If her house was in the area, then surely her family was too. However, Shioriko shook her head.

“No one lives there now. My mother said her family was gone, but I don’t know any details. Neither Ayaka nor I have ever met anyone from our mother’s side of the family...”

The conversation lulled, and there was only the sound of her cane tapping the ground in the darkness. Even assuming that Shinokawa Chieko’s relative all passed away later, it was unnatural for Shioriko not to have met a single member of her mother’s family. There had to have been some sort of circumstances behind it.

We turned right just before the railroad crossing, and began to walk up the sloped road. This was a road I was very familiar with. I always had to go this way when I walked from my high school to Kita-Kamakura station.

“So why did your mother’s classmate call you?” I brought the conversation back to the original topic.

“I...don’t really know.”

“Huh?”

“She said she would tell me the details when we met.”

“That’s it?”

“She said it was something important.”

It sounded almost as if the conversation was going to be about Shinokawa Chieko. If I had to guess the reason Shioriko asked me to come with her, she probably felt uncomfortable about this strange request and was relying on me.

The path on the slope suddenly became narrower. This part was

near the mountains that surrounded Kamakura. The houses here were old and expensive from what I knew, but the cars parked in the driveways were almost all light vehicles. I suppose there was nothing that could be done about that given how small the roads were.

We finally arrived at the end of the road and stood in front of a set of stairs that went even further up the mountain. If we went up the stairs and walked for about five more minutes, we'd arrive at my old school. I hadn't been here since graduating though.

"Is the house just ahead?"

"No...it's right here." Shioriko stopped me just as I was about to start climbing the stairs. There was an old house surrounded by a tall fence in front of us. There was densely packed ivy crawling on one of the walls, but it was winter, so all of the leaves had fallen.

A sign with the name *Tamaoka* was attached to the cracked concrete gatepost. Past the iron gate, I saw a single illuminated room facing the garden. The place somehow seemed miserable.

"..."

Shioriko stood still for a moment, but she soon stepped forward and opened the gate. The garden was well taken care of, but there didn't seem to be any plants that had flowers or produced fruit in this season.

While we waited for someone to show up after Shioriko pressed the doorbell, I stood behind her and started at the hydrangea brank running alongside the fence. I remembered seeing it in bloom when I went past this house back in high school.

I heard the door open and reflexively straightened my posture. A small woman wearing a black turtleneck sweater appeared in the doorway. Her hair was styled into what could be called a short bob cut with the bangs cut straight. Parts of her hair had streaks of white. If I had to guess, I'd say she was in her fifties.

“Sorry for coming so late in the evening. I-I’m from Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. We g-got a phone c-call ealier today...” Shioriko stammered helplessly as she introduced herself.

“Shinokawa Chieko’s daughter, right?” The woman smiled gently. “I was the one who called; my name is Tamaoka Satoko. Please, come in.”

Satoko said there was something she wanted us to see and led the two of us to a western-style room at the end of the hall. It seemed the room was used as a library, with its bookshelves with frosted glass doors lined up against the wall along with the ticket curtains draped over the window. There was also a chair with wooden armrests and a small table. Perhaps the owner enjoyed reading here.

“This was my father’s library. He passed away two years ago, but I took over and have been managing it ever since.” Tamaoka Satoko explained.

Some of the books in the library were piled up on the table and on the floor, with the odd large print art-book or personal literature collection standing out from the rest. It seemed the deceased had a deep interest in the fine arts and Japanese literature.

Hm...?

I felt something off about the room as I looked around. I felt like I had seen this scenery before—no, that had to be my imagination. I had never stepped into this house before today.

“My father moved here almost 50 years ago, and often visited Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia in those days. There are many books here that were purchased from there, and many others that the shop bought from him. Did your parents ever say anything about my father? Concerning what kind of books he bought, and the like.”

Shioriko shook her head at Satoko’s question. “I’m sorry, my parents haven’t really...”

“I see,” Satoko smiled to smooth things over. “That’s understandable, I suppose. He hadn’t been able to visit the shop since his legs started to worsen about ten years ago. I need to apologize for asking you such a strange question.”

“No, I don’t mind...”

He seemed to have been an important customer, but Shioriko wasn’t even helping around the shop yet ten years ago. It was no surprise she didn’t know.”

“Umm..a-about your request...is there something you needed our help with?” Shioriko asked.

I also wanted to know. If it was something like selling off all of the books in the library, then a simple phone call would have sufficed. If all she wanted was to reminisce about her late father, then she wouldn’t have called Shioriko over to begin with—she didn’t know him.

“Do you also do consultations like Chieko used to?”

Shioriko’s expression became tense at the mention of her mother’s name.

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“Chieko often took requests from people who came into the store, you know. She would even take on difficult problems if they were related to books...I’ve been hearing from people recently that you do the same thing.”

I gulped. I remembered how Takino told me that there were rumors going around that the shop was once again accepting requests. I couldn’t believe we were now being asked for consultations like this.

“I cannot handle things the same way she would have...” After thinking for a while, Shioriko answered. “...but I would like to listen to your request, if you’re fine with that.”

In other words, Shioriko wasn't rejecting her. I felt a little uneasy about this. I couldn't tell if it would be dangerous, but this case felt different from all the ones we had taken so far. Like Takino said, we should be cautious.

"Thank you very much." Satoko expressed her thanks, and continued in a muffled voice.

"I want you to take back the book that was stolen from this room."

We moved over to the guest room right next to the library, and sat across from each other in the antique lounge suite there.

"Before I begin, I want you two to take a look at this book. I imagine it's one you'd be familiar with."

Tamaoka Satoko took out a book and its slipcover, wrapped in waxpaper. Shioriko's eyes shined when she saw the book, but naturally, I didn't recognize it.

The name of the author and the title of the book were printed in hard to read letters on a white card set in the brown slipcover.

Spring and Aura (Mental Sketch)

The author was Miyazawa Kenji—a name that I of course knew well. His children's stories and poems were always a staple in Japanese textbooks. I believe he was also the author of that famous poem where he brought snow from outside for his dying sister.

"This is the first printing of ***Spring and Aura*** published by Sekine Publishing, isn't it? I've never seen one in such good condition before...would be alright if I looked inside?" Shioriko's tone suddenly became eloquent. As usual, it was like she became a different person when she handled books.

"Yes, of course."

Before Satoko even finished speaking, Shioriko took the book in her hand and took it out of its case. Anyone could see she was

excited. The cover of the book had some sort of plant design printed all over it. On the spine were the words *Poetry Collection Spring and Asura Miyazawa Kenji*. Even an amateur like me could tell it was an intricate, refined design.

“When is this book from?” Shioriko asked in a whisper.

“It was published 87 years ago in the 13th year of the Taisho era.”

“87 years ago...”

For a book that old it was certainly in excellent condition. There was hardly any yellowing or tears to be seen. Clearly it had been well taken care of.

“Is this a valuable book?”

“Of course!” Shioriko answered right away. “Miyazawa left behind many works, but the only ones that were published in his lifetime were the children’s stories and fairy tales collection *The Restaurant of Many Orders*, and *Spring and Asura*, which we have here. Both were self published...and did not sell well at the time. The author had to purchase a number of the books himself.

“Really? But wasn’t there also *Night on the Galactic Railroad*? What about that...?”

“*Night on the Galactic Railroad* existed as a manuscript, but it was only compiled into a collection of his complete works posthumously. It wasn’t released at all while he was alive.”

“Is that so...”

I groaned. So even his famous works were no exception.

“The author made such a significant number of revisions to it that even after many years, scholars debate which version is definitive. This isn’t something rare in Miyazawa Kenji’s works. Even for this *Spring and Asura*, the first printing isn’t necessarily...ah....excuse me.” Shioriko blushed and apologized to Satoko.

I also came back to my senses. I had forgotten that other people

were here, and we ended up talking about books like we usually did.

“Ah, I don’t know much about books, so it’s not the shop owner’s fault.”

“Oh that’s quite alright. In that cause maybe I should tell you a few things about this book too. I heard a lot of it from my father, however.” Satoko smiled gently as she faced us and began to explain.

“You know, after the first print of ***Spring and Asura***, Miyazawa’s reputation went far and the number of people who loved his books increased. My father was one of those people. He brought this book in the 30th year of the Heisei era, about 50 years ago... even back then, this book was rare and was seldom seen even in bookstores in the city.” She explained without the slightest hesitation. It seemed Satoko was also a bookworm. Though I supposed it would come as no surprise that a bibliophile was old classmates with Shinokawa Chieko.

“Where did he buy it then?”

“Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. The second copy came from there as well.”

“Second copy?”

It sounded like this was related to why we were called over. Shioriko poked my elbow and had me look at ***Spring and Asura*** when I leaned forward to get a better look. The title was printed on the opening page.

The sudden typo was off-putting, but it looked like that wasn't what Shioriko wanted me to see. A red stamp had been marked under the word "skech". I felt like I had seen this stamp, a hydrangea within a square border, somewhere before.

I gasped. I had seen this exact same stamp on my grandmother, Goura Kinuko's, copies of Natsume Souseki's complete works—with the exception of *Volume 8: And Then*. After receiving *And Then* as a present from someone, she bought the rest of the collection from Biblia.

"I'm sorry to interrupt...but was your father the one who made this stamp?"

"Yes. All of his books had this stamp imprinted on them. It's because he loved hydrangeas...even growing them in this house was his desire."

I remembered how she said earlier that Biblia purchased a number of books from her father. In other words, the Natsume Souseki complete collection originally came to Biblia from this house, and my grandmother purchased it after that.

Two completely unrelated people were bound by old books. It felt mysterious somehow.

"Just now, you said that your father owned two copies of *Spring and Asura*, correct?" Shioriko quietly closed the book as she spoke.

"The fact that you're showing us this one means that the 'stolen' book was the second copy of *Spring and Asura*."

Satoko had a distant look in her eye, and looked down at her hands crossed on top of her lap. There wasn't a single ring on her bony fingers.

"You're just like your mother after all," She muttered to herself.

“My father did in fact have two copies of *Spring and Asura*. As you might have guessed, the second was also purchased from Biblia. Your mother, Chieko, was the one who sold it to my father about thirty years ago.”

“My mother?”

“Chieko would come over to play sometimes when we were in middle school. She got along well with my dad. He was quite taken by her and often gave her books as presents. He really enjoyed talking with young people who loved books, I suppose.

“The reason she started going to Biblia was also because my dad recommended it and said it was an interesting shop. It wasn’t until after she dropped out of graduate school that she started working there, however.”

“My mother attended graduate school?” Shioriko asked, her eyes wide. It seemed there were things even she did not know about her mother.

“She did. She focused specifically on history and said she was doing research on publishing and distribution in modern day Europe. She had various things she was interested in, but she seemed to like that one the most.”

I didn’t know what sort of research that entailed, but it did sound like it was related to books somehow. Shinokawa Chieko wasn’t just someone who loved books, she was also someone who aimed to be a scholar.

“But she only stayed in graduate school for a few months. Due to family reasons, she had to drop out and start working. Chieko didn’t like talking about herself much so I don’t have the details. Do you know anything about it?”

“I also don’t know much about my mother’s past...my father might have however.”

“I’m sure he would have known more,” Satoko nodded.

It seemed she was also acquainted with Shioriko's father. She likely visited Biblia in the past from time to time, like her father.

"And what about my mother selling *Spring and Asura* to your father...?"

"About half a year after she started working at the shop, Chieko gave my father a call and asked if he would be interested in buying a first print of *Spring and Asura*. She found it while doing a home call with one of her clients and ended up buying it for some tens of thousands of yen and well...offered it to my father. She knew that he was collecting first prints of Kenji's work."

"She was entrusted with those kinds of purchases after just half a year?" I interrupted without thinking.

I had also been working at Biblia for half a year, but I'd never done a home call all by myself. I couldn't even imagine purchasing a rare book on my own.

"I believe she did it without getting permission...my mother was exceptional in that sense," Shioriko whispered to me and smiled at Satoko.

"The previous owner of Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia rebuked her severely for buying and selling books on her own, but since all the books she dealt with brought in profits, he soon let her do as she pleased."

So she made him recognize her ability. However, the hidden side to that were absurd dealings like the one with *The Final World War*.

"But your father already had a copy of *Spring and Asura* that was in good condition, didn't he? He ended up buying a second copy from my mother...are you saying that the second one was in even better condition?"

"No...in fact, I think its condition was worse. The cover was stained and the inside had writing in it."

"Then why...?"

“I don’t completely understand, but maybe he wanted to have a spare copy...or perhaps he purchased it to encourage Chieko who was working so desperately.” Satoko spoke slowly as she thought over her memories.

“But you know, both my father and I were attached to the book that was in worse condition. Because that book had passed through the hands of someone who had loved it...regardless of the worth it would have had in bookstores, it was a valuable book to us.”

I could sympathize with her words. It was like Shioriko had said before...old books contained stories in and of themselves. Their value could not be determined by price alone.

“I would like to hear you explain the circumstances from when the book was stolen to me in detail...but before that, there’s one thing I’d like to ask you.” Shioriko raised a single finger as she spoke.

“Have you reported this to the police?”

“...I haven’t.”

Satoko had remained serene all this time, but now her face warped in anguish.

“Can you tell me why?”

“I’m sure you can guess.” She looked down.

“It was my own family that stole the book. Either my older brother or his wife...one of the two. That’s why I don’t want to make it public.”

“My father didn’t leave behind a will on how his inheritance would be divided, but it had more or less been decided beforehand. My mother passed away before him, so it would only be split between my older brother and me, you see.”

“My brother inherited the sports shop that my father owned along

with the rights to the building. I inherited the house...and was also given responsibility over the books in this library. Half of the collection was to be donated to the new library of his alma mater once it was built. The other half would be sold to Biblia.”

“That’s why we invited your father to this house...it must have been two years ago, and my father knew he would pass away soon. Mr. Shinokawa looked tired at the time, but he still shared old stories with me as I helped...but thinking about it now, his condition was...we may have asked him to do something unreasonable.”

“Ah, excuse me. I got carried away.”

“Let me continue. It was decided that most of the books, including this copy of *Spring and Asura*, would go to the library at my father’s alma mater once it was completely built. However, my father left a single book behind for me...and that was the book he had bought from Chieko. It was my favorite book among all the ones he had.”

“My older brother, Ichirou is three years older than me and his relationship with my father...no, his relationship with me isn’t too good either. He helped my father with the shop, but moved out when he was young. Now he lives in Takano with his wife and son.”

“His house isn’t far from here, but he rarely visited. After my father’s legs started to deteriorate, he began to have even less contact with my brother and his family. He rarely saw them, with exception of my nephew who occasionally stopped by to beg for pocket money. I’ve had only a handful of phone calls with him since my father’s funeral.”

“Anyway, about a month ago, my brother suddenly stopped by for a visit. He said he didn’t have any business and just wanted to chat since we hadn’t seen each other in so long. When I mentioned that half of the library was sold to Biblia as we talked over tea, the color of his face changed. He asked me to hand over half of the money I got from Biblia since it was also part of the inheritance.”

“Since the management of the library was left entirely to me, I

never told him about the books being sold.”

“It wasn’t something he wanted to admit, but my brother told me that business had not been going well lately, and that money was tight. Perhaps the real reason he came that day was to ask if I could lend him some.”

“However, I also believed that he had a right to the money. Ultimately, I deposited half of the money I received into his bank account.”

“At that time, I had told him that the remaining books in the library were going to be donated, and not sold...but a few days after I gave my brother the money, I got a phone call—this time, from his wife. She said that her husband told her that there were books remaining in the library, and suggested that we sell those too, and split the profits between us.”

“Of course, I refused...but she began to call me every day after that. I was so disgusted with that household that there were many times that I did not pick up the phone.”

“Last Sunday, my brother unexpectedly pulled up to the gate as while was out in the garden. With his wife in tow, he said they wanted to have a discussion about how the books were going to be managed.”

“I’m sure they deliberately chose a time when they knew I’d be at home. My aunt had come to visit a few days before, and I told her about my plans to garden on Sunday. My brother and his wife must have found out from her.”

“I invited them into this guest room, having been left with no choice. It only took an hour, but this was by no means an enjoyable conversation.”

“I told them over and over that donating the books was our father’s wish and that the agreement had already been made with the university, but my brother and his wife stubbornly insisted that I annul that agreement and allow them to handle everything.”

“When they finally had the temerity to tell me that they had already contacted a bookshop in Jinbōchō, and that they could have the books sold within the week, I couldn’t take it anymore. I furiously told them that I intended to follow through with my father’s will and that they were never again welcome into my home before chasing them out of the house.”

“But my temper cooled down as I stood by the gate and saw them off. I thought that perhaps I had been too harsh that time. I went back into the house and walked back to my father’s library while trying to think of other ways to convince them.”

“But the moment I entered the library, I noticed something unusual.”

“There were signs that someone else had been in the room. The doors on the bookshelves were all open and of all things, the one book that wasn’t going to be donated, the copy of *Spring and Asura* that my father passed down to me, was missing...”

“I’m certain the book was there in the library when I was cleaning it that morning, and have no doubt that it was either my brother or his wife that took it. Both briefly left their seats during the conversation, so they definitely had an opportunity. The doors to the bookshelves don’t have locks either.”

“I called my brother right away and asked him to return the book, but he screamed at me saying he knew nothing about it. His wife also insisted that she knew nothing...”

“I’m not concerned about the money. If my brother was in trouble and asked me to lend him some, then I would have helped him to the best of my ability...all I want is for the book to be returned to me. I want you to identify the culprit and convince them to return the book. Of course, I also intend to pay you what I can.”

“I implore you from the bottom of my heart. Please accept this request.”

Having finished her fast-paced speech, Tamaoka Satoko deeply

bowed her head. Shioriko, who had been listening intently without the slightest movement, opened her mouth to respond.

“As I said before...I don’t know how much I’ll be able to help.” Her tone was more passionate, stronger than usual. “That being said, I want to help you fulfill your father’s final request. Please, raise your head.”

It felt like I had gotten a glimpse of a different side to Shioriko. This was a case that she chose to accept; not one she had been dragged into due to circumstance. While she certainly wasn’t good at dealing with people, I supposed that didn’t mean she disliked them.

Takino said that Shioriko didn’t start taking requests until recently, but maybe that was because there just hadn’t been any opportunity, and it had nothing to do with me coming to work at the store.

That also kind of felt lonely in a sense.

“However, I’ll need to ask you a few questions. Would that be acceptable?”

“Yes, of course. Ask me anything.” Satoko said, clinging to Shioriko’s words.

“First, why do you think the culprit would take the more damaged copy of *Spring and Asura*? The better copy was also in the library, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t believe my brother knew that there were two copies. He had already moved out of the house when my father purchased the second one. My copy of *Spring and Asura* was in the library, but he must not have known that it wasn’t among the books that were going to be donated. I doubt he even realized there were two different books.”

True, it would it would be difficult to tell if there were two of the same book, even if they were in different locations within the same

room. And if he was already under the impression that there was only one copy, there would have been no reason to search for a second.

“That makes sense. Thank you very much.” Shioriko nodded and followed up with her next question.

“What kind of person is your sister in law? Could you tell me her age and occupation?”

“Her name is Sayuri and she’s 41, maybe 42 years old. There’s a big age difference between my brother and her, but she used to be one of his employees. They started a relationship outside of work... and eventually got married when she became pregnant with my nephew. She still works as his right-hand man even now.”

No wonder. If the store really “wasn’t doing well,” then both of them would be in financial trouble. It made sense that they’d leap at an opportunity to make money.

“Do the two of them read a lot?”

“I know my brother used to read books from my father’s library, but I probably couldn’t say he’s well-read. I don’t think Sayuri has any interest in reading though. I remember my father smiling bitterly when she said she didn’t know a single one of Takuboku’s poems.”

I couldn’t bring myself to laugh at that. I couldn’t remember a single one of them either.

“You said they left their seats halfway through. Could you elaborate on the timing?”

“I brought my brother and his wife to this room at about 11 o’clock or so.” Satoko looked at the pendulum as she scored her memories. “About 15 minutes in, Sayuri left saying she needed to make a phone call home. She had left her cellphone at home, and asked to borrow mine...and went into the hallway holding her bag.”

“I’m assuming in order use the black phone in the hallway.”

Shioriko replied. It seemed she had memorized where things were placed in this house at some point.

“Could you hear Sayuri’s voice from the hallway?”

“No...I was still arguing with my brother during that time, so that would have been impossible. Sayuri returned after five minutes or so. A short time after, my brother left for one, maybe two minutes to use the restroom. They didn’t leave their seats at any point after that.”

It felt like the brother was more suspicious to me. I had used the restroom myself earlier and knew it was right next to the library. He could have pretended to do his business and instead gone into the library to take the book. His wife also had the opportunity, but it would have been difficult for someone who was not familiar with books to choose the correct one out of the many in the library.

“And when your brother and his wife were leaving, you saw them off to the gate, correct?”

“Rather than seeing them off, it was more like the argument continued out to the gate...I was agitated and should have known better...” Satoko answered hesitantly. It must have been a fierce argument in its own right.

“So those two brief periods were the only times you weren’t aware of what they were doing?”

Satoko nodded clearly and confirmed Shioriko’s question.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Shioriko placed her fist on her chin and looked down at the table. She was probably organizing the events in her head. Perhaps there might even be some clue in all of this.

“Do you remember what were they wearing?”

“Wearing?”

“Right. What kind of clothes did your brother and his wife have on

that day?”

I was also confused by this question, but Shioriko was probably looking for something specific.

Their clothes must not have left much of an impression on her, because it was a short while before Satoko answered.

“My brother was wearing a thin, bright red sweater and green pants...he didn’t have a coat. Sayuri was wearing a purple coat over a blue dress...I think.”

Clearly they enjoyed wearing gaudy clothes...a sharp contrast to Satoko.

“Did they have anything with them?”

“Let’s see...my brother was empty handed, but Sayuri brought a brand name handbag with her. She kept it with her when she made the phone call.”

“I see...” Shioriko had not changed her posture. “Were there any people outside of this household that were aware of your father’s collection?”

“...Just my father’s old friends I believe...I don’t think any of our other relatives knew either. My father only talked about books to those who loved reading.”

Shioriko finally looked up. It seemed she was finally done asking questions.

“Have you figured something out?” Satoko asked and waited for an answer.

Shioriko quietly shook her head.

“Let’s see...in order to get a clearer picture, what I’ll need to do—the first thing I’ll need to do—is talk to your brother’s family. Could you provide me with their contact information?”

“Certainly. Give me just a moment.” Satoko took out a pen and began writing a phone number on a memo pad.

Her handwriting was childlike, and it was hard to read characters. Looking at it closely, the tip of the pen was shaking—she had probably been unable to stop herself from trembling. It was obvious just how important this book was to her.

“I’m so sorry for giving you such an unreasonable request. There’s no one else I can turn to for help.” Satoko’s eyes were wet with tears as she handed over her brother’s contact information.

“I’ll send him a message to let him know you want to talk him. Really, I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

Shioriko and I drove over to Yokosuka the next day.

Tamaoka Satoko’s older brother, Ichirou, had his shop headquartered just off the highway. It was located on Dobuita Street across from a theatre. There was an American military base in the city, so the abundance of English signs didn’t seem strange.

The five story building contained both a store and an office. There were very few customers visible behind the open automatic doors.

“This is the place, right?” Shioriko asked to confirm.

“It should be,” I replied.

The plan for today was to talk to Ichirou first since his wife was away managing one of the branch stores. We didn’t get the opportunity to talk with them directly over the phone, but we were able to get this meeting arranged with surprisingly little trouble.

The tall employee organizing the racks of sportswear suddenly turned to look at us. He was a tanned muscular man who for some reason was wearing an orange short sleeved polo despite the season. His slicked back hair was black, but there were deep wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes.

“Ah, welcome. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you. Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, right?”

He greeted us loudly and walked towards us. Shioriko pulled back a little as he approached her; it seemed she was uncomfortable dealing with people like him.

“Call me Tamaoka. My sister already told me what’s going on. Shall we get started then?” Tamaoka clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

“My wife and I left our house in Takano at about 10:50am that day. Since there are no shortcuts by car, we had to go the long way around and got to the house at about 11am. My sister was at home working in the garden at the time, so we went inside to have a conversation. It ended up turning into a big argument though, and we left without even having lunch. We did a little shopping after that and didn’t get back home until about 12:30.

Without even being prompted, Tamaoka Ichirou began blathering about the events of that day the moment he took a seat. We were currently in a family restaurant near his sports store. It was still too early for lunch, so there were only a few customers around. Tamaoka’s deep voice rumbled all the more conspicuously.

“But you know, I really thought my sister was just saying things when she said there was another copy of the first print of *Spring and Asura*. I bet pops really paid a fortune for it.”

“The person running the store back then isn’t around now, but I believe...”

Tamaoka grinned at Shioriko’s attempt. His teeth were straight, but one of his molars was silver.

“That was Chieko right? Your mom. She came to our house to play from time to time so I know her. She was an unbelievably beautiful girl...just like you, in fact. You’re a very lovely woman,” he said quite boldly.

It was surprising just how different the two Tamaoka siblings were. With such a huge difference in personalities, it was no surprise they didn’t get along.

“So, what did you want to talk about? Please, ask me anything.” Tamaoka placed both his hands flat on the table and leaned forward.

Personally, I thought he was extremely suspicious. Why was he acting so friendly when he knew we suspected him of stealing the book? It made no sense.

Shioriko still had her hands on her lap as she stared at the business card that Tamaoka had placed on the table earlier. After a while, she hesitantly spoke up.

“Did the name *Ichirou* perhaps come from one of Miyazawa Kenji’s works?”

“That’s right. Be it *The Restaurant of Many Orders*, or *Matasaburou of the Wind*, it’s a name that appears in many Kenji stories. My friends used to tease me saying it was an old fashioned name. I don’t know why my father specifically gave it to me though.”

Now that was something I could relate to. My own name Daisuke came from Souseki’s *And Then*. In my case, the reading remained unchanged though.

“Do you read a lot of books?” Shioriko asked.

“I don’t mean to brag, but I read a lot. Even more back when I lived at the old house.” Tamaoka replied without a second of hesitation. It definitely sounded like bragging.

“My father didn’t know it, but I used to voraciously read the first print books I took out of his library. I became especially became familiar with the first editions of *Spring and Asura* and *The Restaurant of Many Orders*. Even now I don’t have any interest in reading the more recent publications. Those first editions were perfection you know... erm, not that I’d go and steal them or anything. Even if I were the thief, I’d aim for Kenji’s other work, *The Restaurant of Many Orders*. That one’s much rarer.”

It seemed he did have some knowledge about books, but nothing

he said was helping his case.

“Today we only came to consult with you. I don’t believe that you were the one who took the book.”

Shioriko’s words shocked me. This man was supposed to be our strongest suspect...if it wasn’t him, then there was only one other person remaining.

“That’s right. I knew you would understand.” Tamaoka said strangely happily. He then purposefully looked around before lowering his voice.

“That said, that would mean my wife stole the book, wouldn’t it? Well, I wouldn’t put it past her...ahh, even if she did do it, hypothetically speaking, it wouldn’t have been out of malice. Our store’s been in hard times and things haven’t been easy for us.”

Now he was starting to treat his own wife as criminal. I really couldn’t like this guy. Call him insensitive, or irresponsible or whatever...was he really not the culprit?

“I wasn’t necessarily implying that your wife stole the book.” Shioriko responded as matter-of-factly. A few wrinkles appeared on her forehead above her glasses. “There are various other possibilities...even if you didn’t take the book directly, it would not be out of the question for you to have orchestrated the theft.”

Even Tamaoka Ichirou looked daunted by that statement. Like Shioriko said, he could have easily instructed his wife, Sayuri, to steal the book.

“Well, there’s no helping the fact that I’m being suspected.” He leaned back on his chair and put his fingers behind his head. “Did Satoko talk about me much? About how her relationship with me is terrible, and how I never visited Pops and stuff like that?”

We stayed silent. Satoko had expressed it a little more elegantly, but he pretty much hit the mark.

“I know what I did to Satoko is hard to forgive. The care of our

father was all pushed onto her, and I barely helped even until the very end. She hasn't even married at that age...though I suppose personality might also have something to do with it...but in retrospect, we certainly should have been more aware of her troubles." Tamaoka now spoke solemnly.

Unexpectedly, it seemed this weighed heavily on his mind. This was in spite of the fact that he recently went to his sister to ask for money.

"It's not like Kenji where I can bring in snow for her. Not matter what I bring her now, it's not going to turn into food from Tushita heaven."

Tamaoka said that and glanced at Shioriko. The words *food from Tushita heaven* seemed familiar somehow.

"It's a line from *Morning of the Last Farewell*, one of the poems in ***Spring and Asura***." Shioriko explained to me.

Come to think of it, I did know this poem. It was the famous poem he wrote for his dying sister that began with the line: *Before the day ends you will be far away, my sister*.

Tamaoka suddenly smiled broadly. "Yes, exactly right! You really are just like Chieko. We used to talk like this and she always got every quote right." He had a distant, nostalgic look in his eyes.

"Indeed, she truly was a beautiful, wise, yet kindhearted book girl—completely different from my own book loving sister, Satoko. I always used to think how nice it would be if Chieko was my sister instead. How is she by the way? I haven't heard any news of her from my sister."

The wrinkles on Shioriko's forehead deepened. This man had no idea what kind of person Chieko really was and what had happened in the Shinokawa household.

"What was up with that?" I asked after we returned to the van. I didn't say anything before for fear of making things worse.

Our work for the day was still not done. Now we were going meet Tamaoka Ichirou's wife. I started the car and began to drive away.

"He was saying such horrible things about his sister...are you sure he's not the culprit? He's incredibly suspicious."

"I can't say for sure how much involvement he has in this case but..." Shioriko answered. It seemed she wasn't happy about this either. The wrinkles on her forehead had not yet disappeared.

"...But it would have been physically impossible for him to take the book out of the library himself."

"...Impossible?"

We passed through the Yokosuka metro area and continued down a steep, cliff-like slope. This was a mountainous area that had much steeper hills compared to Kamakura.

"Please remember our conversation with Tamaoka Satoko yesterday. She said that her brother showed up empty handed didn't she? Even if he did pretend to go to the restroom and steal *Spring and Asura* from the library, he would have had nowhere to keep it. He was only wearing a thin sweater, and hiding it in pants would have been difficult."

"Ah..."

That was also true. At the very least he wouldn't have been able to return to the room with the book still on him.

"What if he took the book and dropped it off in his car to pick it up later...if not there, then somewhere else."

"Remember that he was only out of his seat for 'maybe one or two minutes'; time-wise, it's extremely unlikely that he would have been able to go into the library, quietly sneak into the car near the gate, and return in that time. Even if he had chosen some other hiding spot, Satoko followed them all the way to the car, so there would have been no time to retrieve it."

“I see...in that case, what if his wife stashed it in her handbag? He could have taken the book and hidden it somewhere to arrange for his wife to hide it in her bag afterwar...no, nevermind.”

I realized it before I finished. His wife was the first one to leave her seat...that at least ruled out Ichirou as a suspect.

“But there’s also the possibility that he gave her instructions to steal the book right? That way it wouldn’t be difficult to find and steal the book quickly even if the person he was cooperating with wasn’t knowledgeable about books.”

“While that certainly is true, I don’t believe Ichirou was as knowledgeable as he claimed. It felt like he was just regurgitating what he heard from other family members. At the very least, his story about avidly reading the first edition of ***Spring and Asura*** was a lie.”

“Why do you say that?” I remembered him quoting a line from *Morning of the Last Farewell* earlier.

“***Spring and Asura*** is currently put out by a number of publishers, but the conclusion for *Morning of the Last Farewell* is often as follows.

On these two bowls of snow you will eat

I pray from my heart

May this turn into the food of Tushita Heaven

And soon bring to you and all others

Sacred nourishment

That is my wish, and for that I will give all my happiness. ^{|1|}

You might already know this one, it's what Tamaoka Ichirou quoted."

"I do." I nodded with my hands still on the steering wheel. I was pretty sure this was the version I used to see in my textbooks.

"Incidentally, *Tushita Heaven* is a Buddhist term referring to one of the heavens. It can be understood as the outer court where heavenly beings who have been released from worldly desire reside, and the inner court where Bodhisattva Maitreya lives."

I didn't really understand her explanation, but it kind of sounded like a place where people with pure hearts ended up.

"However, the term does not appear in the Sekine Publishing version of *Spring an Asura*. The corresponding lines are as follows.

On these two bowls of snow you will eat

I pray from my heart:

May this turn into ice cream from the heavens

And soon bring to you and all others sacred nourishment

That is my wish, and for that I will give all my happiness.

Pretty different, aren't they?"

They really were different. The version in the first printing sounded gentler, but the version I knew felt like it had a nicer rhythm. I couldn't say which one was better.

"Why are they different?"

"Miyazawa Kenji continued to edit and refine ***Spring and Asura*** himself even after it was published. The reason *Morning of the Last Farewell* is different in the first edition is because of the applications of edits that were discovered after his death."

I was gradually being drawn in. This was my first time hearing this story.

“Does that mean there are other works that were revised?”

“Of course.” Shioriko nodded in the passenger seat. “There are a number of revisions throughout the book...in fact, he left behind several revisions of *Spring and Asura*, to the point that it’s believed that there are still revisions that have yet to be discovered.”

Meaning there were a great number of updates. Come to think of it, I know *Night on the Galactic Railroad* had some revisions. *Spring and Asura* was probably similar.

“Why did he continue to make alterations when it was already published?”

“Until the very end, Kenji considered *Spring and Asura* to be a collection of “mental sketches.” What’s collected in the book aren’t poems, but a rough sketch of the thoughts he had at the time that he then wrote down. The author himself never called this work a “poetry collection”. Perhaps he saw it as a rough sketch that could be fleshed out and polished over time.”

“But if I’m remembering correctly, didn’t that book have “poetry collection” printed on it? It was on the spine.”

“That had nothing to do with the author’s will and was arbitrarily added in after. *Spring and Asura* was considered an elaborate book for something printed in the countryside, but it was still it was far from Kenji’s ideal. There were many grievous misprints, you see.

“True...”

The “Mental Sketch” printed on the opening page surely must have also been a shock to Kenji.

“That means what he said before...”

Tamaoka had called a book that even the author was unsatisfied with “perfect”. Not only did he lie about only reading first prints, he

was literally just saying whatever came to mind.

Considering his meager knowledge of books and lack of opportunity, he likely had nothing at all to do with this case.

“Does that mean his wife stole the book on her own? But then...”

Tamaoka Sayuri knew even less about books than her husband did...or was that all a façade?

“I can’t say that yet. I believe there are still other possibilities to consider.” She didn’t elaborate any further. I supposed she would explain what she meant after our talk with Sayuri.

We passed a tunnel and entered the city of Zushi. It was still only noon. It was starting to look like we had a long day ahead of us.

The meeting place that Tamaoka Sayuri chose was a neat café and restaurant near Hayama Marina. Having arrived early, we decided to have lunch there while we waited for her.

Since there weren’t many customers on this early March weekday, we were able to snag a seat with a wide view of the ocean. This somehow felt like it could be a date. I was curious about what Shioriko thought, but she didn’t seem to think anything of it.

“Since we have some time, let’s talk about Miyazawa Kenji’s books.” With that, she instead began to talk about old books.

A part of me wanted to talk about something else, but still, it was an interesting conversation. We finished our lunch, and she was explaining over coffee how Kenji’s earlier collections were deeply connected to antiquarian bookstores, and how he may not have gotten published at all if it weren’t for their support. As she spoke, I realized that there was a middle-aged woman in a checkered purple coat standing next to the table.

She was worryingly thin, but was tall and had a well-defined features, with her short hair serving to emphasize the bones in her

face. She looked fatigued down to her very core.

“Tamaoka Sayuri.” She introduced herself in a flat voice and sat down to order a cappuccino before we even had the chance to introduce ourselves.

“I usually take a break here when going back and forth between the store here and the one in Zushi.”

I guessed this was the only time she’d be available to talk. Shioriko took the opportunity to hastily introduce herself and me.

“This is about one of Satoko’s books that went missing, right? I don’t know which one though.”

“Ah, yes...it’s a first print of Miyazawa Kenji’s *Spring and Asura*.” Shioriko’s voice was a little shrill. As always, she was having trouble talking to someone who spoke bluntly. But I was sure her switch would be flipped soon and she’d start feeling more comfortable if we continued talking about books.

Sayuri did not so much as twitch at Shioriko’s answer. It seemed this really was her first time hearing about the book.

“According to Satoko’s account, you had a conversation with her on the day this occurred.”

“If that’s what you want to call it.” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. Unsurprisingly, it seemed she didn’t think kindly of us.

“We were told that you made a phone call...may I ask who it was to?”

“My house.” She unexpectedly answered without resistance.

“It was just before my son’s entrance exams. He likes to slip away and slack off the second I take my eyes off him, so I was calling to make sure he was actually studying. He can also confirm that it’s something I do often.”

What was up with that? I could understand having a zeal for education, but I was sure her son hated it if he was already in

middle school.

“Was your son...at home then?”

“He was, and I talked to him for about five minutes. I drank some tea from a plastic bottle after I hung up and went back to the guest room right after. I had a slight cold that day, you see.”

So that was the reason she left the room holding her bag. The amount of time she said she was gone matched up with Satoko’s account. It would have been difficult to finish up a phone conversation and then sneak off the library at the end of the hall to steal the book in that short time.

Of course, we couldn’t say if she was telling the truth. He son was the only one who could confirm whether or not the phone call actually happened, but I doubted she would be happy to let us ask him.

“If you want, I can call the house and have my son confirm. Classes are already over and he’s probably lazing about anyway.”

“Eh...is that really OK?” I blurted out on accident. She was being very cooperative despite her evident foul mood.

“You wouldn’t believe me otherwise right?”

That was when her cappuccino arrived. She waited for the café employee to leave before taking a sip.

“I was out of the room for several minutes and had a bag that could reasonably hide a book. If I don’t say anything you’ll continue to suspect me, and I’d rather not be treated like a thief.”

Tamaoka Ichirou’s ruddy face came to mind. I couldn’t just believe that Sayuri and her husband were *both* innocent.

“Would there be any problems if we visited your house and talked to your son directly?” Shioriko suddenly asked.

“Eh?” Sayuri furrowed her brows. “Is that really necessary?”

“...Yes.” After a moment, Shioriko answered decisively. I couldn’t

understand why it would be necessary, but clearly she had something specific in mind.

“I suppose it’s fine then. Just make sure not to mention anything about a stolen book. Don’t ask about anything that’s not related to the phone call.”

“Thank you very much.” Shioriko bowed her head in reply.

Tamaoka Sayuri finished off the rest of her cappuccino in a single gulp. It seemed she didn’t want to spend too much time dawdling here.

“Ma’am, I heard that you don’t read many books.” Shioriko continued the conversation.

“That’s right; or more accurately, I hate reading. I said that the first time I met my father in law and barely ever talked to him after that. He was someone who couldn’t get along with people who didn’t like books.”

Tamaoka Sayuri smiled bitterly as she remembered her interactions with him.

“Have you ever gone into the library at that house?”

“Never.” She spat out the answer.

“Rows and rows of books as far as the eye can see. The image gives me shivers. I’ve never like bookstores or libraries either.”

“Is that so...” Shioriko sounded extremely puzzled by this. She probably couldn’t even imagine what it could be like to “hate books.”

“By the way, is it really that expensive? That *Spring and Asura*.”

“...depending on the condition, they can be worth up to one million yen.”

“Really? That much? Unbelievable.” Sayuri’s eyes were shining and she set the cup down with a clatter. “I knew the books in that house were worth a lot. There’s more benefit in selling them than in

having them donated. She doesn't need to be that stubborn about it."

She didn't have any interest in books, but she certainly did care about money.

"Satoko said before that she wasn't concerned with the money—that the book was much more important. If the book gets returned, she said she wouldn't mind lending you some."

Sayuri suddenly sat up straight in her seat next to Shioriko's, her face expressionless. After staying still for some time, she sighed and leaned back on her chair.

"Did she really say that?"

"...Yes."

"So she was rich after all." A long sigh came out from her pale, parched lips. "Saying something like that so easily, she definitely grew up wealthy. My husband is similar...it's somehow childish."

She looked back and forth at our puzzled expressions as she muttered to herself.

"That family really was sloppy with the inheritance. My husband mainly got the shop and Satoko the house in Kamakura. However, the store was saddled with lots of debt and, well, it's not like it's going to fold at any moment, but it hasn't been easy. While I was running myself ragged, I heard that a number of valuable books were going to be donated. I thought, why not sell them and split the profits equally? No one would lose that way."

So those were the circumstances. It seemed she also had her own problems to deal with. I could understand why she would be so insistent on selling the books.

"Like I said before, I didn't steal the book. And I would've returned it right away even if I did...being able to receive money would make me happy enough."

Sayuri glanced at her wristwatch and stood to put her coat back on. It seemed it was time for her to go back to work.

“Well, I’ll need to get going. Do you know where my house is?”

“Ah, yes...I heard from Satoko...umm, may I ask you one last question?” Shioriko raised one finger. “When did you make the decision to visit Satoko’s home last Sunday?”

Sayuri stopped moving midway into putting her arm into the coat sleeve. She narrowed her eyes and looked out the window, searching through her memory. Outside, a boat riding a wave could be seen returning from the open sea.

“I think it was during breakfast on that day. We wanted to talk with Satoko about selling the books, but couldn’t figure out what would be a good time to meet her...then my husband mentioned that she was probably going to be cleaning the house that morning. We left shortly after that...did you have any other questions?”

“No, that was all. Thank you very much.” Shioriko politely thanked Sayuri.

“Daisuke, what did you think of Sayuri’s story?” Shioriko asked me in the van after we left the café.

I drove over a bridge near the mouth of the river and continued on the highway alongside the ocean. The wind coming from the ocean howled.

“How to say this...it didn’t feel like she was lying.”

While there was no question that she had money problems, she seemed to be the type to ask for money up front. Stealing a book like this would be out of character.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm, at the very least I think it’s true that she never entered the library.”

“Why’s that?”

“The library in that house wasn’t set up so that books could be seen every which way you looked.”

“Ah...”

It was probably to prevent yellowing and dust on the books. The books in the library were all behind shut glass doors, the books themselves couldn’t be seen very clearly. Those were the words of someone who had never stepped into the room. That wasn’t to discount the possibility that it was a calculated statement, though.

“By the way, why are we going to see her son?” I asked.

If we were only going to be asking about the phone call, there should have been no need to talk to him in person.

“I want to have a long and slow conversation with him somewhere where his mother’s eyes won’t reach...also, I want him to show me the phone.”

“The phone?”

“Unless it’s extremely old, there should be some form of caller history. If that’s working properly, I should be able to get the number she called from.

“Ah, is that so.”

That would serve to prove if Sayuri really did call her home from her sister in law’s house.

“But I have a feeling that she really did make the call.” Shioriko softly muttered as she stared off at the sparsely populated beach.

I organized everything in my head. Assuming everything Sayuri said was true and that the phone call really did take five minutes, then she couldn’t have stolen *Spring and Asura*.

But that’s strange...

If both she and her husband couldn’t have stolen it, then the culprit was nowhere to be found.

“Shioriko, which one of the two do you think stole it?”

She had been avoiding making any definite statements on that. It didn't feel like she was recklessly evaluating the statements we heard today. Rather, she seemed to already have an idea of what happened.

“I don't have a definite conclusion...” After a brief silence, she answered. “...but I believe we'll be able to find the book by today.”

Tamaoka Ichirou's house in Takano was located in a spread out residential area along the mountainside.

It had been developed some decades ago, and there were few roads that led to it from the base of the mountain, so it took us an unexpectedly long time to reach the house from Kita-Kamakura station. Apparently Ichirou wasn't exaggerating when he said it took him ten minutes to drive to his sister's house.

We parked the van in front of a large house built in a conspicuously high spot. The school I used to attend was just a short downward slope away from here, from which the Hakone mountains could be seen. It was quite a wonderful view.

The nameplate in front of the Tamaoka house had three names written on it—Ichirou, Sayuri, and finally, Subaru. This *Subaru* was most likely the son's name.

I opened the gate and waited for Shioriko to pass by with her cane. Judging by the cross bike resting on this side of the fence, Subaru was probably still at home.

Shioriko pressed the intercom button in front of the house and leaned forward to listen for an answer. However, the door opened on its own without any response from the intercom.

A chubby boy stood in the doorway. His hair was styled into an undercut, with just the top part dyed a bright color. He stared at us from behind his glasses with sanpaku^{|2|} eyes and an expressionless

face.

“U-umm...we’re acquaintances of Tamaoka Satoko and...”

“I already heard from the old lady.” The boy interrupted Shioriko and pointed his thumb at himself. “I’m Tamaoka Subaru...come in.”

He opened the entrance door wide. It wasn’t his fault or anything, but it somehow felt like there was a mismatch between his name and his behavior.

After Subaru led us to the living room, he poured tea into guest teacups for us and placed them on saucers. He even went as far as preparing tea cakes to accompany it. Finally, he sat across the table with a sullen look and stuffed his hands into his pockets. I couldn’t tell if he was being polite or not.

Subaru didn’t prepare any for himself, and instead had a bottle of Yakult for some reason. Perhaps that was his afternoon snack.

“So why do you want to talk to me about what happened last Sunday?” He got to the point right away.

While the boy physically looked more like his father, his personality was similar to his mother’s. He seemed surprisingly calm for a middle school student.

“Oh...yes, that’s right...” Shioriko stumbled over her words. It seemed she got nervous even around middle schoolers.

I cleared my throat and took over for her. She had done all the talking today anyway.

“Can you tell us everything that happened last Sunday? Just the time between breakfast and lunch is fine.”

“Sunday, huh...” Subaru nodded lightly. “I was studying until late the night before, so the old lady woke me up for breakfast. We ate lunch here and she and my dad left for my aunt’s house after that.”

“What time was that?”

“My mom and dad left the house a bit before 11am I think...I was

working on practice questions upstairs when the old lady called me from my aunt's house at about 11:20."

He jerked his chin towards the sideboard in the corner of the room. There was a phone and fax machine next to a table clock.

"So you picked up the phone from there?"

"Yeah, the other handset has broken batteries and doesn't work so I ran down from the second floor to pick up the phone here."

"What sorts of things did you talk about with your mother?"

"Hmm...gimme a sec." Subaru looked off to the side and gathered his thoughts. "It was mostly just her talking on and on by herself. Stuff like telling me to study properly, telling me about the yogurt in the fridge, telling me not to drink too much Yakult...stuff that didn't really matter. I put up with that for five minutes or so."

Subaru sighed. From what he told us so far, all the phone call did was interrupt his studying.

"What happened next?"

"I called her a noisy hag and hung up. She hit my head after she got back and made me apologize for that though..."

Subaru sounded indifferent about the exchange, but at least he apologized. Regardless, all the details matched with his mother's story.

"Would it be alright if I took a look at the phone?" Shioriko asked timidly.

The boy responded with a puzzled look and glanced at the sideboard.

"Sure, go ahead."

Subaru moved his seat forward the moment Shioriko stood up to walk around the table.

"Can you fit through?"

His stomach looked like it hurt a little pressed against the table like that. Subaru couldn't be called friendly, but he was surprisingly kind and attentive of others.

"Y-yes. Excuse me."

Shioriko walked to the phone and fax machine and began pressing buttons. She was probably checking the call history now. After a short while, she looked at me and nodded deeply. The phone records must have matched what Subaru and his mother told us.

That said, the call history didn't give us the duration of the phone call, so there was still the possibility that Sayuri simply hung the phone up immediately and went off the library to steal the book. However, I couldn't imagine Subaru conspiring with his mother to commit the crime.

Although Shioriko said earlier that we would find the book by the end of the day, it still felt like we were far from resolving the case. Just what was she planning to do next?

"The two of you are from Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, right?" Subaru suddenly asked.

Shioriko cast a quick glance at me.

"Have you been to our shop before?" I asked.

"Well...I didn't buy anything, but I did go a few times...it's not like I hate books or anything."

"In that case, we'd love to have you visit us again." Shioriko smiled gently as she returned to her seat.

"...If I feel like it." His tone was as blunt as always, but Subaru's cheeks were slightly red. I felt like I could relate to the boy for the first time.

"The truth is, your aunt, Tamaoka Satoko, had a book stolen from her." Shioriko suddenly, smoothly continued.

"Ehh..." I almost spit out the tea in my mouth. Sayuri had *just* told

us not to mention anything about the theft. What was Shioriko thinking?

“Huh...OK...” Subaru responded with disinterest.

“Yes, and it was an extremely rare first printing of a book published in Miyazawa Kenji’s lifetime. Do you know the one?”

“I do. ***Spring and Asura***, right? It’s famous. There’s a poem in it that has the same name as me.”

“I’ve been wondering about that for a while actually. There certainly is a poem titled *Subaru* in the collection. Is that where your name came from?”

“Nope. My dad’s a big fan of Tanimura Shinji...but if *you* were to ask him, the old perv would probably lie and say it definitely came from Kenji.”

The boy smiled brightly for the first time. He was surprisingly cheerful considering he was bad mouthing his fath— that’s when I finally noticed Shioriko’s behavior. Before I had realized it, all traces of tension had disappeared from her tone and voice. This was how Shioriko got when she was about to solve a mystery.

“Which poem in ***Spring and Asura*** do you like best? Let me guess, is it *Subaru*?”

“Mm, it’s actually *Eine Phantasie im Morgen*. I think it’s really cool. Long though.” Subaru excitedly answered and leaned forward towards us.

Shioriko happily clapped her hands. “Oh that one’s good. I’ve read it so many times. *Molten copper hasn’t yet dazzled / White halo hasn’t yet burned...*” |3|

“*Only the horizon has lightened or darkened / Half-dissolved or thickened...*” Subaru continued the poem effortlessly; he must have read it numerous times himself. Shioriko’s smile lit up like a crescent moon. I felt a chill go down my spine for some reason.

“You really like that first printing of *Spring and Asura*, don’t you?” She said in a well-carrying voice.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That stanza goes something like this in most modern printings of the book: *Only the indigo horizon Has lightened or darkened Half-dissolved or thickened...*so tell me, where did you read the first printing?”

The smile on Tamaoka Subaru’s face withered. I stared at his face—don’t tell me, was he...?

“It’s not like the first print is the only one with the original version of the poem. You can find it in the *Complete Works of Miyazawa Kenji* by Chikuma Shobo or Chikuma Bunko too.”

“That certainly is true. *But what made you think I was talking about Spring and Asura in the first place?*”

“Eh?”

“What I said before was that a book published during Miyazawa Kenji’s lifetime was stolen. The *Restaurant of Many Orders* could have also fallen under that category. I’m sure you knew that, of course, seeing as you used to play at your grandfather’s house on occasion.”

The boy visibly gulped. Come to think of it, I did remember Satoko saying something about that. Her brother barely ever visited the house, but her nephew did from time to time.

“The only people who knew that the house had an extensive library, and that Satoko would be in the garden all morning, were Tamaoka Ichirou, Sayuri—and you.”

Shioriko was saying that the culprits were not his parents, but Subaru himself since he satisfied all the requirements. He knew about the first print of Kenji’s book and had the opportunity to steal it.

“You left the house on your bike the moment your parents left to go to your Aunt’s. You snuck into the house after that so Satoko

wouldn't see you and took the book...am I wrong?"

"...my parents drove to her house." Subaru had his head down to avoid our gazes and tried to put up a feeble argument. "There's no way I could get there before them on my bike."

"No, you could have. Even I could tell you that." I said, amazed. He still wasn't ready to give up it seemed.

"It's about a ten minute drive from here to your aunt's house, but that's only because the roads are limited. But if you go on foot, there's a stairway through the mountain near here that stops right in front of your her house. I know this because I used to go to a high school nearby and used that route to get to Kita-Kamakura station."

In other words, any local would have known about the shortcut. Assuming he left his bike at the top of the stairs and ran down the rest of the way, it wouldn't even take him five minutes to get to the house. He would have had plenty of time to leave the scene and come back home to pick up his mother's phone call.

"Satoko suspects that your parents did it."

"...Really?" Subaru must not have considered that possibility.

Shioriko nodded.

"If the book isn't returned, then the suspicion will never be lifted from your parents."

Subaru tightly chewed his lips. His hands were firmly clenched into fists on the table..

"I'm sorry...I was the one who took the book." He finally said in a defeated voice.

"But it wasn't because I wanted to steal it...I was going to return the book as soon as I was done with it."

Subaru took the two of us to his room on the second floor.

It was a tidy, sunlit room, and in addition to a bed and desk, Subaru also owned a tall bookcase.

The bottom shelves contained paperbacks with Meiji and Taisho era Japanese literature from authors like Souseki, Ogai, and Touson, but the top shelves had neatly arranged manga and light novel series.

“...Just so you know, I keep up with popular stuff too.”

No one had asked him about it, but Subaru told us this with a hint of pride. I wasn't really sure what there was to be proud about though.

There weren't many hardcover books, and the few that he did have seemed to be reviews and analyses of Miyazawa Kenji's work.

Shioriko silently examined the bookcase. After a while, she finally turned her gaze to the wall on her side.

“Oh!” She let out a startled shout.

“What is it?”

“Umm, this drawing...”

There was a framed drawing hanging on the wall. It was a simple, lightly colored pencil sketch of hydrangeas in a glass. It somehow felt like I had seen something like this not too long ago...

“My grandpa made that.” Subaru said. “...And to be honest, I don't think it's that good, but it's still something he left behind for me. I heard Grandpa always put hydrangeas somewhere in all of his artwork.”

That's when I realized it.

The drawing reminded me of the painting of Shioriko's mother that I discovered in the main house behind the store. The flowers in that painting were identical to those in this one, down to the petals and leaves. The reason the chairs and table inside the library of the Tamaoka house felt familiar, was because they were the same as

that painting. I was pretty sure it had been made in the library with Shinokawa Chieko as the model.

So that's how it was.

In other words, that painting was something that Tamaoka Satoko's father—Subaru's grandfather—gave to Shinokawa Chieko as a gift. If I remembered correctly, the date on that painting was June 1980. That would have been around the time Satoko's father bought his second copy of ***Spring and Asura***.

“Umm, here it is.” Subaru held out a book still in its slipcover. This was also a Sekine Publishing edition of ***Spring and Asura***, but its condition was much worse than the one Satoko showed us before. The title on the cover was completely yellowed, and the corners were beginning to peel.

Shioriko looked at the drawing one last time before taking the book into her hands. For now, talking about the book took precedence. She took a seat and took the book out of the slipcover to study it.

Subaru and I followed suit and sat down as well.

The cover of the cloth bound book was faded and had numerous stains and smudges. The area around the edge of the spine was especially bad, with the words *poetry collection* almost completely illegible. Shioriko brought her face closer to the book to inspect the stains.

“I wasn't the one who did that...Grandpa said the stains were already there when he bought the book.” Subaru explained.

“So your grandfather allowed you to look at this book before?”

“Yeah, Grandpa and I had a pretty good relationship since a few years before he passed away. But when I was younger, the only image I had of him was that he was a really quiet guy who gave me pocket money every once in a while.”

For an instant, Subaru grimaced as if he had swallowed something

bitter. It seemed there were some unpleasant memories involved.

“When I was in 3rd grade, my nickname was Suboaru.” He suddenly began a seemingly unrelated explanation.

“What a cruel name.”

“I know. They used to say I wasn’t suited for the name Subaru and called me Suboaru instead. I would be able to fight back against it now, but back then I just ended up taking on that nickname. I hated my own name and even I began to think that maybe Suboaru really was a better name for me...

“...Then one day I told my parents that I was going to Grandpa’s house to get some pocket money.”

“And did you visit him?”

“Yeah. Grandpa was in his library reading books since his leg was injured and he couldn’t really walk much anymore. He asked me if anything was wrong lately. I ended up telling him about how they called me Suboaru and tried to laugh it off. That’s when Grandpa’s face got really serious, and he started to read a poem from ***Spring and Asura*** out loud.”

“Was it *Subaru*?”

“Yeah.”

Shioriko opened the book to one of the pages towards the end of the book. The first thing I saw on the page was that the misspelled title had been crossed out and corrected with a pencil. This was what Satoko must have meant when she said there was already writing in the book. But the strange thing was that misspellings weren’t the only things corrected—additional punctuation and parentheses had also been inserted throughout the book; this definitely struck me as odd.

“The last part of the poem left a huge impression on me...*People who are wealthy cannot rely on their wealth / People who are healthy could suddenly roll over and die.*”

“*People who are smart are weak in the head / Everything we rely on is unreliable.*” Shioriko continued the rest of the stanza. It felt like the poem was about being attached to material possessions. The phrase *roll over and die* stuck out to me somehow.

“All of a sudden, the guys who were it all felt so dumb, both all the people who called me Suboaru and me, for being too scared to go against them. When I got excited and told Grandpa that I didn’t completely get it, but thought it was a really good poem, he told me I understood it well. He also told me that the poem suited me...”

Still frowning, Subaru sniffed. It certainly was a good story though.

“But still, why did you take the book from the library?” Regardless of the reason, we couldn’t just ignore what he did.

“...Because I got a challenge. From Grandpa.”

“A challenge?” I repeated Subaru’s words.

“Grandpa was really smart and had lots of rare books...but the one he loved the most was this one. He even told me he gifted the person who found it for him with a painting.”

That didn’t really make sense to me. The person he gave the painting to was of course Shinokawa Chieko. However, Subaru’s grandfather would have already owned a copy of ***Spring and Asura*** at that point. Was this one much more valuable than that one—or did it perhaps have more sentimental value?

“He told me the reason this book was valuable was because it had a secret.”

“Secret?”

“That was the challenge. He said I could take as much time as I needed and he would give me a prize if I found out what the secret was... But in the end, Grandpa died before he could tell me the answer.”

Fortunately, we had someone who was skilled in solving such challenges right here. However, Shioriko only continued to silently flip through the pages of the book. The image of her sitting on the floor looking down at the book looked like something out of a painting.

“Then I suppose you didn’t get your prize in the end.”

“No, I did. That was the prize.” Subaru pointed to the painting on the wall.

“After Grandpa died, I asked Aunt Satoko about the challenge to see if maybe she knew. She didn’t know the answer either, but brought me this drawing and said that it was probably the prize I was supposed to get. It was a drawing of the hydrangeas that bloomed in the garden, made on the day I was born. She told me Grandpa always planned to give it to me one day.”

I looked at the drawing on the wall one more time. I didn’t want to nitpick something the deceased left behind, but it looked pretty rough. Perhaps if it were a little more polished...

“I didn’t care that much about the prize anyway. What I really wanted to know was the answer to the challenge, but I was never able to figure it out. Aunt Satoko doesn’t even let me look at the book now.”

She probably had her guard up since it was so valuable. It seemed Subaru and Satoko didn’t have a good relationship in the first place.

“I got busy with exams after that, but I was thinking about asking her again, when I heard something insane...”

Subaru cut his words short. I could guess what he was thinking from his silence.

“You mean the talk about the books getting donated?”

“Right. When my dad heard about it he started saying ridiculous things about selling the books instead. I knew there was no way she’d sell the books, but they would still be donated. Before that

happened I wanted to borrow the books for just a bit and spend all my time researching...I never thought that Aunt Satoko would find out...”

I massaged the bridge of my nose. This was all because the Tamaoka couple didn’t have the complete story. The most important part had never made it to Subaru.

“Your aunt always planned to keep just *Spring and Asura*...there weren’t ever any plans to donate it.”

“What? Seriously? Then there was no point in what I did!”

Tamaoka Subaru held his head and looked up at the ceiling. He sounded completely deflated and continued in a tired voice.

“...I need to take the book back and apologize to her.”

Then, Shioriko spoke up. It seemed she had finished her inspection.

“Did your grandfather ever say anything about this book? Before he passed away, for example.”

“Hmm...I don’t think so... No, actually, he did give me a hint.”

“A hint?”

“I visited him with my dad at the hospital a bit before he died. He was already in critical condition by then, but at that time he still happened to be lucid. He asked me all of a sudden how I was doing with the challenge. He looked like he wanted to tell me the answer, so I told him I would find the answer on my own, and he should focus on getting better until then. That’s when he told me to beware of Sergeant Thénardier.”

“...Who’s that?”

“It’s a name that appears in *Eine Phantasie im Morgen* in *Spring and Asura*. He showed up suddenly with no introduction so I don’t really know who he is either...maybe it wasn’t actually a hint for the challenge—is something wrong?”

Shioriko's face had become pale. It didn't seem like it was because she was feeling sick. She most likely figured out the answer to the challenge—no, that wasn't all she must have realized.

“...Mr. Tamaoka.” She spoke in a low voice. “Do you still want to find the answer to the challenge on your own?”

“Of course I do!” Subaru declared without an ounce of hesitation. He had a broad and fearless grin on his face. “I don't mind even if it takes a lot of time. I think grandpa would be happy to see me put all my effort into researching and thinking of an answer on my own. ... But it's not like Aunt Satoko will let me research the book ...”

“I understand.” Seemingly having been caught up in the mood, Shioriko's smile also widened. “In that case, we'll also work with you...can you leave everything after this to us?”

Shioriko and I went back to Tamaoka Satoko's house later that evening. She seemed anxious as she welcomed us into the house. The air around her seemed to say that she had been waiting near the doorway since Shioriko's phone call earlier that afternoon.

We sat across from each other in the same guest room as before. Shioriko took the copy of *Spring and Asura* that we got from Subaru and set it on the table.

“Aah...” Joy spread over our client's face.

“Thank you....thank you so very much. You don't know how happy this makes me.” She took the book into her shaking hands, and after checking that there wasn't anything wrong with it, clutched it to her chest.

At length, embarrassed by her loss of composure, Satoko put the book back down on the table.

“My apologies...I lost myself for a moment there....I'll have to give you a proper payment as thanks for all you've done for me of course. “

“As we discussed before, we’ll forgo any payment this time.” Shioriko patiently explained. There had been a bit of a disagreement about this matter when they talked on the phone before.

“In exchange, I would like you to forget everything that happened, and allow Subaru the freedom to read this book whenever he wants from now on.”

“That would be a problem.” Satoko shook her head decisively. “What he did really should have been reported to the police, even if he is a member of my family. It’s unthinkable for me to let him see this book whenever he wants.”

Shioriko glanced meaningfully at me. We might not be able to resolve this peacefully after all.

“I’m sure calling the police would also be a problem for you.” Shioriko’s tone suddenly became sharp.

“And what do you mean by that?” Satoko blinked in confusion.

“I thought something was suspicious when we spoke here the first time. Why did your father buy a second copy of *Spring and Asura* that was in worse condition? And more importantly, why did my mother offer to sell the book to someone who already owned a copy? She wasn’t someone who would make such naïve business decision.”

Satoko was still puzzled. She still didn’t understand what Shioriko was trying to say, but didn’t stop her from continuing.

“Your father presented my mother with a painting as thanks for finding the book for him. It was only natural to assume then, that this copy of *Spring and Asura* was much more valuable than the one he already owned. After speaking with everyone today, I finally realized the truth.”

Shioriko signaled to me with her eyes again. We had already agreed what to do if things were to come to this.

“Excuse me.”

I quickly leaned forward and snatched ***Spring and Asura*** from the table in front of Satoko.

“Ah!”

The book was already back in Shioriko’s hands by the time Satoko stood up in a panic. Satoko slumped back into her chair defeated. She looked more uncomfortable now than ever before.

“Please take a look at the spine of the book. Do you see how the words *poetry collection* have been smudged out?”

I looked carefully at the book in her hands. I actually didn’t get the chance to hear about the “truth” that Shioriko had discovered in detail. There just hadn’t been any time.

“If you recall, when ***Spring and Asura*** didn’t sell well, Kenji had to buy some copies back from the publisher, which he then gave out to family and friends. He was unhappy about the publisher marketing the book as a *poetry collection* without his authorization and smeared those words out with bronze powder on the copies he gave away.” Shioriko was mostly explaining for my benefit.

“In that case, this is...”

“Correct, it’s highly possible that this was a book that Kenji gave to someone as a gift.”

So they weren’t just simple stains after all.

Shioriko cast a sidelong glance at the silent Satoko before continuing. “However, this wasn’t just any ordinary book.”

She took out ***Spring and Asura*** from its slipcover and flipped through its pages.

I only glanced at it before, but now I saw there were more than just corrections to misprints and missing letters. There were arrows indicating changes to the heights of characters and x’s where lines were to be deleted. In fact, there were even words and phrases that were added and deleted. This looked more like a revision of the

book than anything else.

“Wait a minute...”

I let out a voice. There were traces of revisions in a book that Miyazawa Kenji owned...could this be—

“Are these corrections that Kenji himself wrote in the first print of the book?”

“That’s right.” Shioriko nodded.

“Copies of ***Spring and Asura*** that Kenji improved upon are called revised books. Many of the modern printings of ***Spring and Asura*** incorporate elements from these books.”

I remembered our conversation about the subtle differences in *Morning of the Last Farewell* and *Eine Phantasie im Morgen*.

“As I said earlier today, a number of revised books have already been discovered. The ones in the possession of the Miyazawa estate are arguably the most famous, but the contents differ between them. There are established theories that at least one more revised book exists, but it has yet to be discovered.”

“...And that would be this one?” I stared at ***Spring and Asura***. A revised book that Miyazawa Kenji improved upon—that certainly was an unbelievable “secret.” This was no doubt the answer to the challenge Subaru had been given.

“I’ll need a little more time to confirm...but it’s more than likely.”

Shioriko stared squarely at the owner of the book, but Satoko did not move and sat frozen like a statue in her chair.

“You were hiding this secret from us, weren’t you? You told us the book was valuable because of personal memories. Why was that?”

“That’s because...I didn’t want many people to know. You two didn’t even know how my father got his hands on the book in the first place...and...it really was that valuable...”

“That’s it?”

Tamaoka Satoko hesitantly looked up, but quickly averted her gaze from Shioriko.

“I saw the drawing in Subaru’s room. It was the “prize” that your father prepared for him, a picture of the hydrangea in the garden, drawn on the day Subaru was born.”

“Y-yes, that’s right.” Satoko’s response sounded like she had something stuck in her throat.

“But I’ve seen something that matches that flower down to the finest detail somewhere else before. *In a painting my mother received 30 years ago.*”

Of course. How could I have not noticed it before? There was a difference greater than 15 years between the times the paintings were made. There’s no possible way that a flower that bloomed 15 years ago would have also bloomed 30 years ago.

“The fact that your father made it for his grandson was a lie, wasn’t it? You used a sketch that had always been lying around as a convenient excuse and gave it to him. Then what on earth could the real prize prepared for Subaru be?”

An oppressive silence weighed over the guest room.

“...What do you think it is? Satoko replied.

I could already guess. As Sayuri told us before, the inheritance for this house was sloppily done. There wasn’t so much as a scrap of paper documenting who the books in the library were to go to. The only person who knew, was the woman in front of us.

Shioriko showed the spine of the revised book to the requestor.

“Don’t you suppose the prize was this book? You were the one who told us that your father enjoyed talking about—and giving—books to young people. Does it not make sense that this copy of *Spring and Asura* was always intended to be passed on to Subaru? It was never yours.”

Satoko did not reply. It seemed she had recognized her own crime. I was astonished by Shioriko's brilliant reasoning. In the end, Subaru hadn't stolen anything. Without realizing it, he had taken back something that should have rightfully been his.

"I'm sure your father gave you instructions on what to do with the book after he passed away. He must have also recognized the possibility that you would not follow them."

"Impossible. I can't believe that."

"No, it's possible. Before your father passed away, this is what he told Subaru: *beware of Sergeant Thénardier*...do you understand what that means?"

Satoko's face went deathly pale and her lips began to tremble. There seemed to be an understanding between the two of them, but I was still entirely in the dark.

"Umm...what does that mean?" I asked Shioriko in a small voice.

"Thénardier is the name of a character that appears in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. He makes an appearance as a thief, looting valuables from dead soldiers after the battle of Waterloo."

In other words, that wasn't a hint for the challenge. It was warning to be careful of thieves by your side—an extremely depressing thought.

Satoko groaned. "What do you plan on doing with that book? Don't tell me you're going to give it to that boy. You don't even have any proof that he was supposed to inherit it in the first place. More importantly, I'm the only one in the Tamaoka family that knows its true value....this is something that people who love antiquarian books should hold on to..."

Shioriko quietly put ***Spring and Asura*** back in its slipcover and held it out to Satoko who was still insisting on her argument. Satoko was completely taken aback, unable to believe that the book was simply being returned to her. Satoko looked back and forth between ***Spring***

and Asura and Shioriko in dumb silence.

“My earlier proposal remains unchanged. I want you to keep the book for safekeeping, but make it so that Subaru is free to read the book whenever he wants...additionally, once he discovers the secret on his own, I want you to tell him the truth and ask for his forgiveness. Subaru will be the one who decides the owner of the book after that.”

“And what if I refuse that proposal?”

“I’m planning on regularly keeping in touch with Subaru from the shop from now on. If I come to understand that you have rejected my proposal, I will reveal everything to your older brother directly. I don’t know if he will press charges, but at the very least you will find yourself in a troublesome position with your family.

Satoko maintained her silence, but Shioriko’s expression suddenly lightened up her expression and she continued serenely.

“When your father passed away, both you and Subaru lost someone with whom you could talk about books. In addition, the books you own will someday be passed on to Subaru right?”

That was right. Satoko didn’t have any children of her own, so her inheritance would eventually go to her only nephew.

“I...won’t promise you anything.” Satoko muttered and took *Spring and Asura* into her hands. “But I’ll try to talk to Subaru...it’s not as if I disliked him personally in the first place. It was just that I loved this book.”

“And that is enough. Thank you very much.” Shioriko bowed her head.

Satoko looked at the person who had exposed her secret with faraway eyes.

“You’re an unforgiving person in a different sense from Chieko. I think she would have overlooked something like this...if I were to show her a certain measure of appreciation.”

“I will not accept any bribes...I’m different from my mother.” Shioriko answered harshly. *I have to be different from her.* I could understand what she also wanted to say in her heart.

Satoko had a somewhat lonely smile.

“It was just as Mr. Shinokawa said after all. You still have complicated feelings about Chieko.”

“My father said something like that?”

“Yes...when he came here to purchase books.”

Come to think of it, Satoko did tell us before that she talked about old times with Shioriko’s father when he came to purchase books. This would have been shortly before he passed away—a story from about two years ago.

“He was laughing bitterly about how, before he knew it, you were already trying to sell the book Chieko left behind for you...” Satoko said nostalgically.

Shioriko’s face was wide with astonishment.

I could smell something good simmering in the kitchen. It was almost time for dinner at the Shinokawa house.

I put some books back on the shelf, and turned back to look at Shioriko. She was still sitting on the floor searching through a cardboard box of her father’s belongings.

We were in the room that the former shop owner used to use. After we left Tamaoka Satoko’s house, we returned as fast as we could, and Shioriko began tearing through all of her father’s belongings.

Shioriko believed that if her father had realized that she was trying to sell Sakaguchi Michiyo’s ***Cra Cra Diary***, then he wouldn’t have let it go. I was of the same opinion. It would have made sense for him to take it and keep it somewhere for safekeeping.

However, we couldn't find it anywhere in his room. In the first place, the articles left by the deceased had already been organized before. If the book hadn't already been found then, our chances of finding it now were slim.

"Don't you think we've looked enough for today? We should try searching again tomorrow...I'll help too." I spoke towards her turned back.

"...but it has to be somewhere around here." After a while, I got an absent-minded reply. She had been like this ever since we got back.

"Shioriko, let's stop." I said it a little more forcefully this time, but there was no answer. It wasn't that she was committed to a fruitless search, but rather that she didn't want to admit that maybe the book was nowhere to be found.

...but why can't we find it?

A doubt surfaced in my mind. Perhaps the previous shop owner hadn't realized that his daughter had been looking for the book she once tried to throw away.

However, her father must have considered giving it back to her at some point. He had to have made some preparations just in case when his health began to fail.

What would I do in his position—?

I snapped back to reality and realized the room had become completely silent. Shioriko had stopped moving her hands and was hanging her head in exhaustion.

I approached her, as if compelled, and crouched down right behind her. Shioriko didn't turn around even then. I was close enough to see the fine hair growing out of the nape of her neck right in front of me.

"...Shioriko." I called her name again, but as expected, she didn't respond.

My chest was tight and it felt a little hard to breath. I softly grabbed her shoulder. What was I supposed to say now?

Suddenly, the sliding door opened and Shinokawa Ayaka, wearing an apron over her jersey, appeared.

“Shioriko! It’s time for dinner! Today’s special is...”

Ayaka’s words stopped short and her eyes went wide. I let go of Shioriko’s shoulders in a panic. Why did she always show up with this kind of timing? It wasn’t like I always did things like this.

“Shioriko...dinner.” She must have guessed that something was off. Trying to gauge Shioriko’s reaction, Ayaka continued. “I made that stewed hamburger you love today...”

Shioriko didn’t respond to her younger sister either. She was stiff as a stone statue, completely lost in her own thoughts. Ayaka took a look around the inside of the room, and realized that her father’s belongings were scattered about. But—

“Shiroko, it’s time to eat.” She didn’t mention it and only repeated herself to Shioriko.

The silence continued.

Ayaka then suddenly stomped into the room and kicked away the cardboard box in front of Shioriko. Shioriko naturally raised her head in surprise, and Ayaka hugged her over her apron.

“Shioriko, let’s eat now, OK?”

For a while, the two of them did not move, but at last, Shioriko nodded. Ayaka helped her stand up, and supported her as the two of them walked towards the door.

I also walked out to the corridor and silently saw them off.

“Goura, are you also staying for dinner?” Ayaka asked me as she stood in front of the door to the kitchen. We silently faced each other in the dim corridor. This was probably the first time I had ever gotten a good look at her face. Her round eyes were smiling as

always in her impressively childlike face.

“You’re not going to ask what we were doing?” I asked her in a low voice. Perhaps she didn’t hear me, or maybe she was pretending not to have heard me, Ayaka tilted her head.

“Huh?”

“Actually....never mind. Thank you, I’ll stay.” It had been a while since I had stewed hamburger anyway.

I smiled and walked towards the dining room.

EPILOGUE

THE KING HAS DONKEY EARS -PART II-

POPLAR PUBLISHING

2011/3/8 Today's Events Shinokawa Ayaka

We had stewed hamburger for dinner tonight. I thought it was pretty good, but it could have used a little more mushrooms. That's how I'd prefer it, anyway.

Shioriko didn't eat that much, but Goura on the other hand ate like a wolf. Guys really do have amazing appetites.

Goura and Shioriko closed the store for the day and went somewhere together this morning. The second they got back, the two of them started turning Dad's room upside down looking for something.

Do you think they found out about it?

Shioriko probably doesn't know, but I think Goura must suspect something. He'll probably tell Shioriko to ask me about it.

But how could he have found out? Is it because of what I've been writing here? If that really were the reason, then it would be just like in that story. I wrote about it a while ago, but I'm talking about *The King Has Donkey Ears*.

The hairdresser knew the King's secret that he had donkey ears and was dying to tell someone, so he talked about the secret into a hole in the ground near the riverbank. But there were reeds (I've never seen grass like that before) growing near the hole, and every time the wind blew, they repeated what the hairdresser said.

The secret got out in the end and the king became unable to hide his ears...meaning that they never went back to normal, I guess. I bet that was just the worst for the king. But I think the hairdresser

who went out of his way to talk about the secret where those strange reeds lived was also really suspicious.

But what if what he really wanted was for someone to listen to him? In that case I can understand his feelings.

I think I'll have to stop writing if Shioriko really did find out about this. I've been writing to you ever since the year after Dad died, but you never replied even once. It's like I only write about recent events these days.

I recently reread everything recently, and this began looking more and more like a diary since Autumn last year. Since this will be the final one, I think it's time to write you a proper letter.

How are you, mom?

Me and Shioriko are both fine. I'm trying my best in school and housework, and Shioriko is working hard to manage the store with Goura.

I really only have a single request for you.

Please say something to Shioriko. By email or phone or postcard... it doesn't matter how.

I know she misses you even more than I do. I'm sure there's a lot of things about the shop she wants to talk to you about.

Shioriko is starting to look more and more like you did when you were young. Lately, it's been hard to tell her apart from the painting on the second floor.

I don't really know about now, but in the past, I don't think she would have been happy to hear that she looked like you.

You know how Shioriko didn't used to wear glasses in middle school? She started wearing them again after you left. She did that for my sake. She'd definitely deny it if I said that to her, but I know.

I used to cry in kindergarten and at home every day after you left, and one day, Shioriko started to wear glasses just like yours. I think

she wanted to take your place so I wouldn't become lonely.

She did that even though she was extremely angry at the time and didn't want to see your face at all...I love that part about her.

It's fine even if you come home without calling or anything. Shioriko might get mad, but I'll do something about it somehow. I'll even make food for everyone...my cooking's pretty good, you know.

I don't know if this letter will reach you at all.

I've already given up on getting a reply now, but mom, I'd be happy just knowing you read my messages.

Shouting into a hole like this is so lonely.

I need go to bed now since I have practice early in the morning, so good night.

I hope you stay well no matter what happens.

Goodnight.

Ayaka stopped just before clicking the send button. As always, she was worried that her message wouldn't reach its destination. Ayaka had a ritual for whenever she felt like this. She pulled open the desk drawer and pulled out the single book inside.

Sakaguchi Michiyo's ***Cra Cra Diary***, the book that her late father had entrusted directly to her.

The book she was trusted to give to Shioriko when the opportunity arose.

She took the book out of its slip cover and opened it to the last page, where a single line was written in ballpoint pen.

shinokawa@chieko-biblia.com

No matter how many times she compared them, the address in the book perfectly matched the email address on the screen.

Ayaka sighed and closed the book.

And after that, she clicked the send button.

AFTERWORDS

As I've also written before, many of the books and locations, among other things that appear in this series are real. There were some imaginary elements included due to the story direction and various other circumstances, but the timeline also more or less conforms to reality.

Our protagonist began working at Biblia in the summer of 2010. Time marched on during this third volume; we went past the end of the year and saw the volume come to a close in March of 2011.

The first volume of this series first appeared on shelves in March of 2011, and this volume went on sale in June of 2012, so there is something of a gap with reality.

What I want to say is, sometimes discrepancies are born between the events in the novel and the events in real life.

For example, there was a case in the first volume where it was mentioned that only books published by Shincho Paperback had book cords. The truth is, however, that wasn't the only version with the book cord; the Seikaisha version published in 2011 also came with one.

For another, in the series, ***UTOPIA: The Final World War*** by Fujiko F. Fujio was described as an illusionary book that few had ever read, but Shogakukan Creative currently publishes a reprinted edition in the same format as the original. I've also been told there are plans to have it included in ***The Complete Works of Fujiko F. Fujio***.

While I believe discrepancies like this are inevitable, it makes me happy to see books that were previously unavailable new are now being republished.

That said, I'm sure there will always be things that I've misunderstood beyond temporal discrepancies, so I still make sure

to research and check everything to the best of my ability.

This time, I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Kanagawa Prefecture Vintage Books Association for their assistance in gathering information. And then to Fukuda-kun, who really was a great help. Next time is on me.

I've already decided on which authors will appear in the fourth volume, and was reading research materials as I wrote volume three. It's deeply interesting and the more I research, the more I want to know. It's a shame that I won't be able to include everything I've learned in the upcoming volume.

I expect it will be released sometime in the winter.

It would be an honor to see you again in the next volume.

-Mikami En

TRANSLATOR NOTES

CHAPTER 3

[1] Original translation by Hiroaki Sato.
<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/morning-last-farewell>

[2] Eyes in which the white space above or below the iris is visible.

[3] Original translation at Poetrykanto.com